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No. 2



PASTORAL SYMPHONY



By the same author

CATTLE CAMP
LANTANA
THE BRIDLE TRACK

PASTORAL SYMPHONY

By

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SOME years ago, I discussed with my publishers the possibility of a novel that would cover the pastoral side of Australian history. The idea was well received, but after months of research work—for which privilege I am chiefly indebted to the Mitchell Library of Sydney—I came to the conclusion that the history of the evolution of the merino sheep and the cattle in Australia lay in the story of its people.

With the exception of well-known historical characters, every endeavour has been made to avoid the use of names of actual persons living or dead. No one named John Sim arrived in the First Fleet, and should the names of any other characters resemble those of any actual persons, the coincidence is purely accidental and no reflections whatever are intended.

The early history of Australia is full of gaps as the historian had to rely chiefly on official reports for his entries. We know, nevertheless, that many "discoveries" were known years before their official dates; the unofficial nature of their discovery placed them beyond the ken of the historian. I hope, therefore, that I may be forgiven for filling in some of the gaps in my own fashion.

The whole story is too big in every way to be enclosed in one volume. This book, although entitled *Pastoral Symphony*, is only a beginning—an overture and the First Movement.

J. J. H.

Sydney, 1939.



DEC 1941



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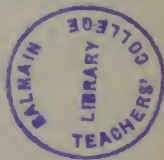


CHAPTER I

FROM the edge of the forest where the man sat merged in the cool shadows, the promontory jutted northward into the blue water. On either side nestled a sheltered cove; northward again, a bare half mile across the water, rose the dark wooded hills of the opposite shore.

It was peaceful up here. The low ridge of the promontory shut off the ramshackle settlement sprawling beside the little stream at the head of the cove. The thin smoke of its cooking fires hung in a streaky haze above its hidden squalor, and only the chop of an axe or the dull thudding of a mallet, softened by distance, intruded on the silence. Half-way down the bay blunt-stemmed ships rode at their cables, the sails tight furled on the yards. Farther out lay a little ship of war, her gun ports veiled like those of the *Sirius* frigate riding aloof with an air of watchful responsibility over the clattering transports and their human freight spawned along the shore.

From the ragged line to which the invader had driven it, the forest looked sadly down on its lost territory. Here and there between the rudely hacked stumps, a few tufts of yellowing grass continued the unequal struggle for existence, all ignorant of fate's decree that they were the last of their kind to flourish there. For the trampling feet that hourly threatened to crush and uproot them were only the vanguard of an ever-increasing army, and neither grass nor trees would ever grow there again.



Up there in the forest edge, with the dappled shade of the straggling gum on his faded threadbare clothing, only a keen observer could have distinguished the motionless figure. Thick black hair curled tightly on his head, his features were swarthy with a thin hawklike nose, and the deep-set brown eyes alone contradicted the apparently listless pose. They were alive with a keen expectancy as though their owner was relying for perception on the most minute details.

So when he turned his head quietly on the lean native who noiselessly materialized from behind a tree, the broad black features split in a wide grin of appreciation as he squatted opposite the white man, laying his long red spears and heavy wooden nulla-nulla close by his side. Although their conversation was chiefly limited to signs and gestures it was evident that this was not their first meeting and, also, that the white man had met with some degree of success in translating his purpose. The black, with a deft movement of his hand, swept a clear patch in the dust between them and with his index finger traced a crude design—a pattern of lines which the other's eyes followed keenly and with apparent comprehension.

Then the white man began to check up on the diagram. He pointed to the water of the bay below. "This water (*bado*) here?" His finger indicated a curved line in the dust. The black beard of the aborigine wagged assent.

Pointing to a long snaky line traced in the dust, he demanded again: "This river—*bado*?"

Again the black nodded, adding with a pleased smile, "*Budgerie bado!*" (good water) and going through a pantomime of drinking. Then pointing

to the salt water below them he shook his head vigorously—"Weere bado."

Suddenly he halted in the midst of his pantomime, glanced quickly over his shoulder, then snatching the bundle of long red spears from the ground he disappeared swiftly into the timber.

The white man hastily obliterated the marks on the ground and looked up with quick hostility in his eyes. A few yards away stood a woman carrying a bundle of firewood in her arms. Her rough, ill-fitting skirt was bedraggled and rent and a torn shawl was crossed tightly across her thin chest. Although only in her middle twenties, her sharp features, thin-lipped, drooping mouth and lustreless eyes made her look ten years older. She limped forward and let the bundle of sticks slither to the ground. She did not flinch from the cold, appraising eyes that swept her but stood dispassionate, swaying a little on her feet with lassitude and fatigue, barely conscious of the brief inspection. Then a distant movement among the trees above the patch of cultivation drew the brown eyes from her and the woman turned slowly in the same direction to investigate.

Through the scattered timber of Farm Cove, half a dozen animals straggled reluctantly toward the rough stockyard, urged on by the high-pitched shouts of the ragged individual hopping back and forward through the trees behind them. They had wide flat horns as black as their hairy hides. A hump rose above the shoulders and the rump sloped sharply to the thin black tail. Just then, a half-grown calf detached itself from the side of its dam and in a spirit of devilry dived away from the yard and back to the shelter of the timber. A torrent of

maledictions rose from the cowherd stumbling and slipping awkwardly in pursuit.

The woman watched the gathering scorn in the eyes of the man at her feet with apparent satisfaction, and her thin lips twisted sardonically.

"Still frettin', John Sim?"

The man recoiled instantly and turned on her with fierce eyes.

"An' who wouldna? Sendin' a *hairdresser* to look after kylies, an' me—a gipsy—delvin' clay oot o' a pit to make bricks. The dunderin' fools!"

"The world's full o' fools. An' here"—one hand swept the tiny settlement—"here's the biggest fools of all."

The man snorted impatiently, then his gloomy eyes dropped and searched the ground between his bare calloused feet.

"We're the fools that got cotched."

In the ensuing silence the woman eyed him closely. His thick black hair curled up like a duck's tail at the nape of the neck where the collar of the rough canvas coat met it. The coat was branded with the familiar broad arrows and a rough P.B. surmounted a crudely painted number. But what a person wore was a very minor detail; every one in the Camp who did not wear a uniform sported the devil's livery. It was little personal points that roused her interest—the hidden strength of the lean brown hands with the black hair growing on the backs of the restless fingers, the challenge of the fierce eyes that had survived the soul-destroying brutalities of the prison hulks, and the hint of mystery, somehow connected with that black savage that had melted into thin air the instant she took her eyes off him.

"What did you get sent out for, John Sim?"

The man never lifted his eyes from the ground at his feet and his voice was gruff.

"Gettin' cotched!"

"What at?"

"What I had done a' my life—and my people afore me. Takin' a rabbit in a snare."

"A wonder they didn't hang ye."

"Better to hang and get over with it than rot in a dark stinkin' cell or the innards of that bloody ship." The savage scowl he threw in the direction of a transport found a ready echo in the look of hate and loathing as the woman followed his gaze.

"You're a man . . ." She sank to her knees on the ground, her features contorted and lips drawn tightly back from clenched teeth. "What about us wimmen—over a hundred of us—packed in that hell's hole in the *Lady Penrhyn* for eight long months? . . . More like eighty years, it was. Oh, the trulls! The devils that men are!"

"Took ye a long time to find that out, hey? What did they catch you at?"

The woman gave a low, derisive laugh that sounded more like a snarl.

"For bein' a decent woman! If I had been as free o' my body as those trollops down there I would still be doin' my mistress's hair . . . with a roof over my head, a bed of my own to sleep in, and food to eat—*plenty of food!*" She paused, gloating at a distant incredible memory of a time when there had been food enough and to spare, then she went hurriedly on as though to take her mind off the subject.

"She had writ some letters—the little fool—and was sorry for it too late. To dry her tears I went

to the knave's lodgin' to get her letters at a time when he should have been far away. He came back and found me there. . . . Barred the door behind him and stood with a villain's smile on his face. I had more than a share of good looks then and he thought to amuse himself with me awhile. But I fought him tooth and nail, till others came battering at the door." She paused; then, each slow, deliberate word loaded with biting, stinging contempt: "He was a fine gentleman. They believed him. I was only a servant. So 'Larceny!' sez the Judge. . . . An' my pasty-faced mistress, too afeared to stir a hand to help me. 'Seven years' transportation,' sez the Judge, 'and may it be a lesson to ye.'

"*A lesson!*" The words oozed slowly from her tight lips, each syllable heavy with cold, scathing passion. "For denying one man they threw me into a foul gaol full of filthy trulls and drunken harlots that laughed at me. An' because I had something they had forgotten the meanin' of, they threw themselves on me . . . stripped me . . . smothered my screams while the divils of gaolers had their will of me. Then the ship—swine were never herded in such a hole. The sailors an' the sojers makin' free of us. . . ." Her tortured eyes glared a fierce malediction on the settlement, its stark ugliness smirching the virgin landscape, and the dark hulls of the ships on the faintly rippled bay. Then her head dropped in sheer exhaustion.

The man eyed her idly and unmoved till her grey eyes lifted again and fixed him with a hard, dispassionate stare.

"*When have you fixed to run away, John Sim?*"

The man recoiled at the deliberate question as

though a snake had suddenly threatened him. Then as quickly, the swarthy features recovered from their surprise. His eyes glanced quickly around to see if they were observed, and a look of cold ferocity crept into them as he leaned threateningly toward the unflinching woman.

"What d'ye mean by that, ye trull?"

"You know what I mean. Haven't I watched you for days colloquin' with that black savage, pointin' and makin' signs and scratchin' lines in the dirt?"

"So ye want to go back to the fine officer ye lie with an' tell him the tale so ye can watch John Sim get the back stripped off him wi' the lash!"

"I do not!" Undismayed she met his savage snarl with the hard light still dominant in her eyes. "If I was a man I'd ha' bin off to the woods days ago an' rid meself for ever of these swine!"

"An' starve to death or be cooked an' et afore ye got a league away."

"As well that as slow starvation in this hell-hole. The miserable rations they give us to last a week are only fit for a single day. What have we to live for, anyway? Will any of us ever see England again?" Her voice was deep with scorn.

"Listen, woman!" The steely threat lingered in the narrowed eyes and the aggressive, jutting chin. "It was tellin' a woman my plans that sent me here. An' even if I *did* take to the woods, think ye I would drag a skirt at my heels?"

"I would be no hindrance. I swear it!" she pleaded.

"Away wi' ye, woman!" The man rose to his feet and turned on her with an ugly look. "One word of this an' I'll slit yer throat!"

The woman regarded him with a grim, triumphant smile.

"I'll be here to-morrow, John Sim." Then, as he turned abruptly on his heel, she picked up her bundle of firewood and started leisurely in his wake. Down at the Camp the drums were beating the evening muster. The earth seemed to be erupting grey figures that slowly converged into ordered groups. Long shafts of light streamed across the still waters of the Cove from the red ball of the sun lingering just above a dark pile of western hills. In its slanting rays a latent spark of hope seemed to kindle again in the pale eyes of the woman and to infuse a semblance of life into her dragging steps as she hurried toward her hut above the Cove.

The next afternoon she waited in vain, and so with the next and the next again. The winter sun was smothered in low, grey, drifting clouds. Sharp drenching showers swept the little settlement, turning the ground to greasy mud that slithered through the bare toes of the miserable convicts and concealed sharp-pointed twigs and roots to torture the feet of the unwary. Daily, the woman watched the gangs returning from the brickfield, slushing morosely with bent shoulders back to the Camp, their dripping rags plastered with yellow clay. She watched John Sim slouch out of the gang toward his hut or foray for firewood, but always on the opposite side of the Camp stream and sedulously avoiding Farm Cove where they had met. And as the days dragged slowly and painfully past, the rekindled flame of hope flickered fitfully, yet she dared not seek him out.

On the fourth day the sun shone clear again, but a keen-toothed breeze stirred the scanty convict

rags and found the chinks in the rude huts where the rain had washed the mud away. In the woods the bite of the wind was less sharp, but the sun penetrated only here and there through the leafy screen. The woman, toiling painfully up the slope, through the undergrowth, halted suddenly as a whiff of smoke mingled with an elusive aroma reached her nostrils. Carefully she shifted the faggot across her bent shoulders and moved stealthily through the thinning timber, her thin nostrils twitching as she followed the recurrent scent upwind, fearful lest she stumble on a native encampment and some devil's practice. Then she halted. In the sunlit centre of a little clearing the gipsy squatted on his heels beside a low fire on which rested a black charred object which gave forth an odour, strange but singularly appetizing to meat-starved senses.

Casting caution to the winds, she pushed her way through the low bushes. The man evinced no surprise at her appearance. His head turned briefly toward her, then with a stick he re-spread the coals under the frizzling object. The woman let her burden fall to the ground and seated herself beside the fire without a word. At length, without raising his head, Sim broke the silence. His voice had a sarcastic, accusing note.

"Well, s'pose ye saw that Timson fella slinkin' back out o' the woods yistiddy?"

The woman continued to gaze, unmoved, at the blackening embers without deigning to reply, and the man continued sarcastically:

"Draggin' hissle' back wi' the bones stickin' through his hide, nigh dead wi' hunger. *That's* what comes o' running away!"

Without raising her head the woman spoke, calmly ignoring the line of speech addressed to her.

"What's that on the fire?"

The gipsy prodded the charred object with a sharp-pointed stick and studied it intently.

"Sort o' lizard, it was. If that Timson fella had ever learned that there was other ways o' gettin' meat excep' by stealin' it off a butcher's block, he might ha' bin roamin' the woods yet." He removed the scraggy, blackened carcass from the fire, knocking the adhering coals off with his bare fingers, then he broke it in two. The woman's thin nostrils twitched at the appetizing smell of the unsavoury looking fragment held toward her. Studiously avoiding the donor with her eyes, her fingers clutched avidly at the morsel.

"Peel off the skin. There ain't much inside, but it's more than yer fine officer boy could gie ye."

She obeyed the instructions with eager haste, her famished stomach warming with the first mouthful. The meat was white and sweet, but there was only a bare mouthful of it lining the bony tail. The charred scraps of leathery skin followed the meat at the command of her empty stomach; then, reluctantly, she laid the clean-picked tail-bone beside the fire and licked her fingers, furtively watching the oily fat running down the man's chin as he tore greedily at the remnants of the meagre carcass. When at length only the polished bone remained, she demanded slowly:

"John Sim, are you still hankerin' after the herdin' o' the beasties?"

The broad shoulders shrugged non-committally. The level, incisive voice went on.

"Maybe ye'd like to have them *for yer own?*"

His swarthy features turned suspiciously on her.

"What are ye gettin' at, woman?"

"Just this, John Sim!" She shuffled her feet in the dead ashes. "How is't, think ye, that that owld hairdresser han't lost they cows afore now?"

The dark, curly head shook sententiously.

"He's too feared o' the black savages to go lookin' for good pasture. An' when there's any scrán about, he leaves 'em an' comes back to camp at noon." There ensued a significant pause, then he added: "Maybe one day he won't win back to 'em!"

"An' that day is mighty nigh!"

The man stared hard and questioningly at the speaker. She cast a quick glance around the confines of the clearing, then continued in low, hurried tones so that the gipsy had to lean toward her to hear. "In ten days' time there's goin' to be doin's in the Camp—King's birthday, they tell me. No work that day, and rum for all to drink a health. The hairdresser'll be pinin' for the woods that day, I'm thinkin'!"

"Aye? . . ."

"John Sim," she queried earnestly, "have your blackamoor friends ever told ye if this country is all woods an' wasteland like it is hereabouts? I heard some o' the lags whisperin' that away there lies China." She pointed vaguely to the north. "An' there's a move afoot to cross the mountains an' find their liberty."

The gipsy eyed her in silence, trying to hide the inward perturbation he felt. Was it possible that his attempts at learning from the natives their language, and some knowledge of the inland, had been observed by others as well as this woman, and

that some in the Camp may have guessed at his plans? He leaned toward her.

"What do they call ye, woman?"

"Ann Smith."

"Then listen!" He glanced cautiously around, then spoke in a fierce whisper. "An I happened to know where there are fine meadows an' a big river, plenty o' kangaroo an' all sorts o' game—could ye walk day upon day till ye got to it? An' could ye live a lone life there, never seein' your fellow men—only black savages that like as not'd want to kill an' eat ye?"

"I'll walk till I drop—then I'll crawl on hands an' knees," she answered vehemently, her pale eyes aglow in the thin, lined features. "An' if I niver set eyes on sich o' my fellow men an' wimmen as this camp holds, I'll ne'er complain!"

"Then"—their heads drew closer together—"I'll need a fire-lock, an' powder, an' ball."

"We'll take them!" The woman's face and tones were tense and grim. "They robbed us o' life. They took away every mortal thing I had. Now we'll take what *we* want!"

"Blankets!"

"My officer has a fine pair. I'll offer to wash them for him one day soon!" Her thin-lipped smile augured ill for her military protector.

"I'll hide an axe on the Brickfield Hill—an' a spade. Can ye get a knife?"

"Looks like my officer'll be missin' his," she remarked with a trace of mischief behind the excitement of her voice. "A very nice pair o' pistols he has, too!"

"Good!" The man got to his feet, and as she rose his eyes looked her over in a new light.

"Borrow a pair o' your officer's breeches—a skirt's no thing to be walkin' the woods in!"

She nodded quick assent; then, as she bent to retrieve her firewood, the man turned on her with a rough growl.

"Now get that look off your face, or all the Camp'll know. Think o' the *Lady Penrhyn* till the time comes!"

The woman shivered, the eagerness ebbing from her face as she watched the broad back disappear through the trees.

"The *Lady Penrhyn*," she muttered. From the edge of the clearing she looked down on the dark hulls and spars of the ships at anchor in the Cove and the furtive, hunted look crept back into the pale eyes as the familiar outline of one ship drew them as to a magnet: the *Lady Penrhyn*.

CHAPTER II

GREY wisps of fog hung low across the dark waters of the Cove, draping the squat, black hulls of the transports and weaving a ghostly shroud across the tree-clothed promontory. Dawn broke slowly and, in its grey light, shivering figures emerged from the clustering huts, raking the embers of fires together and crouching over them for warmth that the rough, inadequate blankets did not afford. The increasing pencils of smoke rose and hovered in a low cloud over the settlement as the light gradually lost its opacity. Men and women hugged their grimy rags closer in the chill dawn and moved stiffly about to the accompaniment of foul, ill-natured mutterings during the preparation of the meagre morning meal.

Up on the ridge of the promontory a lone figure watched the scene impatiently from the shelter of the timber. He had no eyes for the beauty of the pearling wisps of mist thinning in the growing light, for the soft outline of wooded shores, bay after bay, the long indented reaches of Port Jackson adding to the view. There was unusual bustle and movement on the distant decks of the *Sirius* and the *Supply*, but down at the Camp the morning lethargy was more pronounced than usual and tended to increase the feeling of irritation and suspense of the watcher.

A radiant halo of palest gold suffused the eastern horizon, and with it a puff of white smoke sprang from the side of the *Sirius*. Down in the settlement pots were dropped with frightened imprecations as the boom of the gun roared out and its echo thrice

repeated was thrown back at it from the wooded hills before the sharp boom of the next gun intervened. A cloud of bright-hued parrots darted screeching from the trees on the point and fled shrieking inland as boom after boom shook the echoes of the silent coves, dispelling the fog but shrouding the ships themselves with a dense, acrid cloud. The last echo of the twenty-one guns rumbled and died, muttering distantly in the wooded hills, and the camp on Sydney Cove awoke to June the fourth, the fiftieth birthday of His Majesty King George the Third.

Down in Farm Cove, where the mists still lingered in the timber and the tall cabbage-tree palms reared their tufted crests, the cattle lowed softly in the corner of the yard where their first frightened rush had taken them at the roar of the guns. They knew that their dilatory attendant would not attempt to release them until the dew was off the grass, yet the ingrained instinct of countless generations voiced their revolt against man's senseless routine with an impatience as urgent as that of the half-wild human crouching on the ridge above.

Although he knew his presence would not be missed before nightfall, possibly not even then if the mellowing influence of the promised issue of spirits had its effect on the overseers, Sim realized that as soon as last night's depredations in the storehouse were discovered his life would be forfeit.

In a cache among the rocks, far beyond Brickfield Hill, bags of rice and salt, weevily flour and biscuit as hard as the rocks themselves, and some coarse brown sugar wrapped in a shirt, lay under sheets of bark with rocks piled on top. It had been a strenuous, sleepless night. Concealed in the low bushes

behind him lay a musket with powder-flask and a military pouch heavy with bullets. The soldier owner lay in hospital and their disappearance might not be noticed for a day or two.

The sun climbed slowly in the clear, unclouded sky, and a cool breeze off the land ruffled the waters of the coves. At Government House, the long, low building just below his eyrie, all was bustle and preparation. At the barracks across the Camp stream, red coats and pipe-clayed belts strutted. Harsh-tongued sergeants in high-cockaded black hats bellowed and cursed; boats began to leave the sides of transports and warships and headed for the shore. Then the long, bent form of the one-time hairdresser turned cow-herd shambled unwillingly up the hill. His dull eyes glimmered at the thought of the promised grog ration and he licked his cracked lips in anticipation. These damned cattle would not range far from the Cove this day.

From the cover of the trees the gipsy watched him closely, cursing every step of his slow-footed progress till he let down the bars of the yard and the cattle streamed eagerly forth to bury their broad black muzzles in the marshy pool. Picking up his gun, Sim moved carefully through the trees in their wake. There was no need to keep them in sight. Their attendant, who had never got over his fear of the uncharted woods, kept up a loud conversation all the time. When he was not addressing the cattle on their misdemeanours, he aired his own heterogeneous thoughts, advertising his presence to all and sundry within a wide radius. Arrived at a small retired clearing, where the yellowing grass grew in scattered tufts, he clumsily rounded the leaders up on the unpalatable pasture. The hungry

cattle, impatient for something better, demurred at the check, but decided to make the best of the situation and nuzzled at the tough grass, winding their black tongues round the tufts. The gipsy watched them for a few minutes, then hastened back to his point of vantage above the Camp.

The sun was already well up in the sky. A soft, blue haze hung over the wooded headlands and the light breeze merely ruffled the dark blue waters. At their original meeting-place, the woman awaited him with a spot of colour tingeing her pale cheeks and a glimmer of ill-suppressed excitement in her grey eyes. A faded bonnet tied under the chin concealed her wispy, honey-coloured hair; the inevitable shawl was crossed tightly on her chest above the voluminous, tattered skirt under which peeped the blunt toes of her boots. Her momentarily startled eyes recovered their composure and lighted at sight of the musket in the gipsy's hand. Now she knew that the die was cast. There was only one path for them and it led far beyond the reach of the settlement. Parting the low bushes, she disclosed a roll of blankets tied with rope. The man nodded his satisfaction and, picking up the bundle, worked it into balance on his shoulder; then to the woman:

"Ready?"

She nodded eagerly, and silently followed in the wake of the stealthy figure threading the tangled undergrowth. Her head was erect, her eyes clear and filled with a steadfast light that they had never known before.

They circled wide round the cattle grazing along a marshy valley. To her surprise, the gipsy paid no attention to the herd, pushing steadily on at a

pace that quickened her breathing and beaded the perspiration on her brow and upper lip. Over low, rocky hills and wide tracts of stony ground covered with bushes shoulder-high they trudged along, circling marshy spots and deviating to find a crossing to a dark, peaty stream. At length, in the shade of a lofty gum-tree from whose virgin white trunk the brown outer bark peeled and hung in long, tattered ribbons, Sim threw down the cumbersome bundle and rested his gun against the trunk. His keen, probing eyes swept quickly over the woman with apparent satisfaction. In spite of the rapid pace she showed little sign of distress; a few spots of dried blood on her flushed cheeks marked the rough caress of a jagged vine, but she did not even seem conscious of it.

"You wait here till I come back wi' the beasties! I'll leave the firelock wi' ye an' dinna take yer eyes off it. Keep a pistol handy in case any black savages come on ye, but dinna shoot unless ye have to."

She nodded quietly.

"All right, John."

The man thrust a pistol into his belt, threw a quick glance at the sun and strode back the way he had come.

As soon as he was out of sight, the woman lowered herself gently to a seat on the bundle of blankets with a sigh of relief. In the man's presence she had held her exhaustion under check, but the months of physical and mental suffering and starvation had weakened her even more than she had imagined. She loosened the strings of her bonnet, threw it aside and ran her fingers through the yellow hair drawn tightly back from her face. Then, to ease her burning feet, she removed the

purloined boots which fitted badly, and leaned gratefully back against the tree-trunk.

From the slight eminence her eyes looked far over an undulating, grey-green sea of forest, dismal in its monotony and lack of colouring. Had it held the bright, verdant green of the English trees she knew, peopled with cheerful singing birds—speckled thrushes, saucy yellow-billed blackbirds and perky finches—the prospect would have brought some degree of comfort. But her northern eyes saw little in the scene to commend it. Away back and to the north, irregular patches of water glistened like bright steel among the dark timber. That, she realized, must be salt water, the far-reaching arms of Port Jackson on whose banks lay the accursed Camp they were fleeing from.

Her head tilted back to rest against the cool white trunk of the tree. The bark was smooth, like that of the stately beeches she had known in England; but there the resemblance ended. The beech bark was dark—the foliage a dense, whispering canopy of green.

Her chin set with sudden determination and a hard glint steeled her eyes. She would *not* think of it. England and all things English belonged to the past—and the past was dead. The homely, comfortable England of her youth was hopelessly, irretrievably lost, defaced and blackened in her memory by the frightfulness, the hideous things to which England and Englishmen had subjected her. Her narrowed eyes saw nothing of the monotonous landscape before her. They swept in lightning retrospect the grim events of the immediate past—prison, hulks, the *Lady Penrhyn*, and the eternal injustice and cruelty of mankind—and there and

then she registered a vow to repress ruthlessly every thought of England for as long as she lived. As for those Englishmen back at Sydney, nothing would ever change her feeling of deep, implacable hate toward them.

The mood passed. Her eyes gradually lost their hardness. She became conscious of a procession of tiny black ants filing up the white trunk to the high branches where her eyes could no longer follow them. They kept so diligently to the same narrow track, some going up, others coming down, that she felt they must have worn a narrow groove—a pad of sorts—in the bark. Yet when she peered closely there was nothing to distinguish their incessantly used path from the rest of the smooth, white curve of the trunk. She turned her head to watch their downward progress and followed the unbroken line of hurrying insects from the base of the tree away in a direct line underneath fallen bark and twigs, avoiding the bigger stones, then winding on between the scanty tufts of grass to some unseen goal.

Long, drowsy shafts of sunlight pierced the irregular foliage of the big tree, and she watched the little motes dancing their way up and down the golden pennons. How clean and pure the air was! After the fetid, sickening stench of unwashed humanity herded like cattle, and with a total absence of sanitation, in the *Lady Penrhyn*, the clean air of the settlement had come as a deliverance. But out here in the silence she realized that even the atmosphere of the Camp was sour and tainted; the smoke of cooking-fires, the accumulation of filth around the huts, and humanity still unwashed, could no longer be ignored.

The sun-washed air under the gum-tree was so

dry and crystal clear that it seemed to crackle in her lungs and the faint, elusive whiff of eucalyptus blended invigoratingly with the smell of dry virgin earth. A crow alighted in a tree close by, examined her critically with his callous, white eyes and reported his find to the world in a series of cold-blooded croaks that made her think favourably of the crows at the elms at—no, she would *not* think of them!

Suddenly she sat up alert as a distant crackle of musketry floated to her ears. Had the gipsy been caught? Were the soldiers after him? Her hand went to her throat and her heart stood still. An awful sense of loneliness overwhelmed her. The grey-green bush landscape assumed a pitiless, terrifying aspect. What would she do if they caught the gipsy? He would hang for a certainty. She had seen men swing for infinitely smaller crimes in the four months since she landed. Two had paid the extreme penalty for stealing some weevily flour from the store, another for robbing a fellow convict's hut of a few mean articles. Retribution on these shores was hard and swift. There was no gaol, and only two forms of punishment—the lash that cut a man's back to bloody strips, or the hangman's noose.

Another volley of musketry rippled out and a flock of small parrots flashed past, skimming low over the tree-tops with their bright colours and long tails, in headlong flight from the strange detonations. The second volley brought reassurance. When a third rippled over the distance and was followed by a ragged salute of twenty-one guns she breathed freely again. It was only the King's birthday. A scornful smile flickered on her thin

lips—the King! Henceforward she would recognize no king, no ruler. The severance must be complete. No memories, no nationality; no past. She was Ann Smith, and although she admitted to twenty-five birthdays, this was the day of her re-birth. Her life started from to-day. So she threw a defiant look toward the booming salutations to a ruler fifteen thousand miles away and, rising to her feet, divested herself of her torn skirt.

The change revealed her thin legs encased in a pair of worn trousers that had been fashioned to fit snugly on the original owner's calves but which left her with room to spare. She threw off her shawl and regarded herself a trifle self-consciously at first. The outward inspection woke a train of thought within her. She stood tense and immobile, her thoughts racing furiously till the uncertainty in her eyes gave way to sudden alarm and her hands rose pressing at her flat breasts. She was glad to sit down on the blankets again and to lean her head back against the trunk.

Beads of cold perspiration stood out on her brow; there was a feeling of nausea within her and her terror-stricken eyes stared unseeingly into space. What if her fears were true! Loneliness, isolation—she had prepared herself for them. But this other thing! The sudden realization of what that loneliness might mean to her—a woman—was overwhelming in its intensity. It sapped all her new-found strength, swept away the craggy foundations of her new life at one blow. There was another terrifying aspect, too. What would the gipsy say—or do—at the prospect of keeping another man's brat? For a brief moment she was frantic. Thoughts of the loaded musket behind her, the pistol at her

side, suggested a quick solution to all the trouble. But the moment passed and she dragged her rioting thoughts together and got herself in hand again.

Half an hour later, her features were still pale and drawn, but the line of her jaw was sharp and rigid and the grey eyes hard and resolute. There would be no going back and no short cuts. She was going on—with her mouth shut. She would cross her bridges when she came to them and not before.

A crackling in the undergrowth brought her thoughts back to the present and she sat up alert and listening. Something was coming her way. It might be a wild animal, but it sounded more like the passage of heavy bodies through the bushes. Then she caught a glimpse of a black hairy hide and rose to her feet with a deep sense of relief. As the animals filed through the thinning timber toward her, she inspected them closely, with a new, eager interest. They were no longer the Government cattle. They belonged to John Sim by a right which he and his reiving forbears had exercised for centuries, and she also had a definite share in them as his partner in the enterprise.

A scraggy cow led the little herd, a mere bony frame draped with a mangy black hide, then came a younger cow with a half-grown bull calf doddering along by its side; the other two cows were heavy in calf. She counted them carefully; four cows, the calf and the big black bull lumbering along in the rear with his wide horns laid back against the hairy shoulders. Again she counted them, and there was a question in the eyes that greeted the gipsy striding toward her. He nodded brief acknowledgment.

"I had to leave a cow. The old fool had her on a

rope. Anyway, he won't look far for this lot if he has to keep an eye on her."

Although she begrudged the loss of the cow, the woman had to admit the logic of the argument. Her eyes left the cattle, standing peacefully in the shade with steadily switching tails, and slowly swept the awful, featureless monotony of the vista to north, south and west.

"Where do we go now, John?" she demanded.

The gipsy's right arm pointed unhesitatingly toward the misty blue horizon of the south-west.

"We have two days' hard travellin' afore we reach the big river the black savage talked about. We'll gie the kylie a rest while we eat."

On the shores of Sydney Cove, the soldiers had dispersed to barracks after firing their three volleys at noon. Life on board the odorous transports was settling down again after their praiseworthy, if somewhat ragged, effort at a salute of twenty-one guns. Governor Phillip's levee was over and the ensign fluttered desultorily on the flagstaff in front of the temporary residence where he stood in contemplation of the scene—a little determined man with a thin aquiline nose under a cocked hat. Already the officers of the settlement and the military in red coats and gold lace were returning to the dinner at Government House, each carrying his bread ration jocularly on the point of his sword, for each man in the Camp, from Governor to convict, received the same strict issue of food.

A miserable ex-hairdresser was already searching the woods for his missing cattle, returning in little shambling runs to ensure that the tethered cow was

still in her place. And, knowing well whose shoulders would have to carry the blame, he was to spend two more days in fruitless search before reporting the loss, by which time the cattle would be far beyond the searchers' ken.

At one o'clock, the *Sirius* and *Supply* boomed out another twenty-one guns each, and Governor Phillip, with the haughty, impulsive Major Ross on one side and Judge-Advocate David Collins on the other, proposed the Royal toast to the assembled guests and proclaimed the first county in this land of New South Wales. He named it the County of Cumberland, in honour of the reigning family, and its bounds—Broken Bay to the north, Botany Bay to the south, and the distant blue line of rugged mountains to the west—"The largest county in the world, gentlemen!"

Not for two more days, when it would be too late, were they to learn that the prized herd of Government cattle—the nucleus of their meat-supply—had been lost to them. Then, after a fruitless search, the chroniclers of the period would assume that the cattle had either strayed or had been killed and eaten by the natives. In any case, they were written off, and the settlement's hopes of fresh beef faded. No one thought to connect the loss of the cattle with the disappearance of two convicts. The lags were for ever taking to the bush, but their remnants invariably straggled back, preferring certain punishment to a slow, miserable death in the wilds.

And all unconscious of these momentous happenings, the two runaways plodded doggedly westward in the wake of their cattle. Their only instinct at the moment was that of self-preservation, tinged with the dawning light of liberty. They were not

to know the true significance of their journey into the unknown—that they were laying the foundations of the pastoral industry of a great continent, with themselves the founders of a dynasty of pastoral kings.

CHAPTER III

THE hut stood in the centre of a little natural clearing carpeted with short green grass and ringed round with a cordon of tall eucalypts that securely preserved the secret of its existence from the world. The hut consisted of one room, its walls of rough, upright slabs, roofed with wide sheets of bark. A wide stone fireplace was built on to one end, its chinks plastered with baked yellow mud. In the middle of one side was the single doorway. Within stone's throw, on the edge of the timber, the rails of a stout stockyard were visible.

A well-defined path crossed the clearing and meandered through the trees, then down the easy slope to the banks of a stream. It widened here to form a broad, deep pool before slipping on to join the river that swirled between steep banks and eddied over the submerged snags. From the outer edge of the coppice, the eye looked over a wide expanse of lush meadows, low rolling hills and broad parkland dotted with stately trees where the black cattle browsed knee-deep in utmost contentment. The herd had increased to the number of ten, and even the original units bore little resemblance to the miserable, scraggy animals that had landed from the First Fleet and eked a bare existence on the sparse, sour grass at Farm Cove. Their sleek, rounded frames glistened in the sunlight and the frisky heifers gave every promise of eclipsing their dams in scale and appearance ere they reached maturity. The herd roamed at will over the lush pasture, slaking their thirst in its pools and wallow-

ing luxuriously in its marshes through the hot days with no inclination to wander farther afield. Every evening the gipsy brought them in to the stockyard where the calves were confined for the night. Then the grown cattle lumbered leisurely back to choose their own camping-ground. The calves remained, unwilling hostages till the morning, when the woman with her iron pot crossed the silver dewy grass to relieve the distended udders of the patiently waiting cows. Then, when the milk lipped high in the black pot, the gate would be dragged open and the impatient calves liberated to seek their share.

Ann Smith sat on a block at the door of the hut, keeping a watchful eye on her infant son toddling uncertainly about her feet. He was naked as the day he was born, and the sun had tinged his skin a warm, golden brown. He had fine, fair hair and his blue eyes could assume a merry twinkle, but except on special occasions he went through life invested in a tremendous gravity. He would sit for hours on the bare, warm earth outside the hut playing contentedly with his primitive toys—oddly shaped pieces of wood, mussel shells from the river, or the well-polished bones of some kangaroo that had figured on a distant menu. His nose was straight, much like his mother's, but lacking the fine, sensitive flair of the nostrils, and his features were broad and stolid.

Time had given generously with one hand to the woman and taken with the other. Her features remained sharp and thin, but her shoulders were straight and free from the hopelessness that had sagged them and dragged at her steps. There was an air of purpose and determination about her—a grim recklessness and disregard of fate—and the

grey eyes were no longer empty, despairing pools but sharp and watchful while still retaining the disillusioned hardness that nothing could ever dispel. They were eyes that looked life sharply in the face; not altogether emotionless, yet limited in their range of emotion. They could register interest without betraying surprise, and their well of tears had been dried at the source. As she sat there watching over her offspring, she had the air of a creature of the wild with her eyes and ears ever alert for the least sign of danger.

To-day she awaited the return of her man with a degree of anxiety that was a mild recurrence of that first awful feeling when she found herself alone in the bush on the day of their flight—a feeling she could never totally banish during his absence on these periodic forays. They lived hard and primitively, with alternating periods of famine and plenty, on the game that the gipsy trapped or shot and on the stores he levied from the settlement.

They did not regard it as stealing. The word had no more place in their vocabulary than in that of the dusky savages who roamed the country. Those white men at the settlement represented the cause of the exiles' misfortunes and hardships and neither the man nor the woman had the least compunction in taking whatever they could lay hands on. The gipsy observed but one commandment—one that he had inherited from his own people in the days when they wandered the lowlands of Scotland and down into the English counties—Thou shalt not be caught!

It was very pleasant sitting there by the doorway with the warm sun gently laving her bare head and its rays deflecting comfortingly from the slabs at her back. She could afford these moments oftener

nowadays and just sit still and apparently watchful, but in reality letting her mind slip back to the immediate past. She never failed to derive a lot of comfort in her present circumstances by these occasional resurrections of the eventful months of exile.

There was the black night following days of rain when the river came down without warning and swept away their first frail hut and most of their scanty belongings. They had waded waist-deep through the surging flood in a pitch-black darkness slashed by the searing, vicious lightning, shifting their things to the safety of rising ground. Fighting desperately against time—and losing—then finally clinging fearfully to one another in that hour of defeat when the lightning flashes revealed an empty expanse of tumbling water where their hut had stood.

The period of famine that followed was a bitter memory. Cold and shivering, without a fire or the means of making one, with all their food-supply washed away and the swollen river running between them and the settlement, their aching stomachs drove them to eat raw, unpalatable things from the memory of which she shrank even now. But they profited by the sharp lesson and thenceforward picked their camps with the utmost caution.

A movement in the fringe of trees brought the woman out of her reverie in an instant. She never moved, but her grey eyes focused fiercely on the spot till a gin appeared, a thin, scraggy female, naked and unashamed. Her long legs were thin as pipe-stems, and as she emerged unconcernedly into the clearing her broad, ugly features broke into a smile and she shouted something in high-pitched tones. The gin strode on past the stockyard and

Ann Smith relaxed again with an air of disappointment; even the blacks had no tidings of the gipsy.

The advent of the runaways and their cattle to the favourite hunting-grounds of the tribe had been the occasion for a show of hostility on the part of the blacks. That had been gradually overcome until the gipsy had won their confidence, and nowadays the presence of the whites was accepted and tolerated good-humouredly by the naked savages. The gipsy and his musket were still regarded with fear, but his assistance in the hunt had won him a reputation and a position the value of which he was not slow to perceive.

But it was only by incessant watchfulness and a determined insistence, backed by the musket, that the gipsy instilled into the blacks the fact that the cattle were not there for indiscriminate spearing. That was their first inclination when the nomads had got over their first frightened curiosity of the strange animals. The idea of owning and domesticating any animals on a large scale was totally foreign to their inclinations and customs. They had their dogs—half-tamed dingoes that swarmed their camps, snarling over scraps of offal and sharing their fires and fleas with equal complacency. But all other animals, from the possum to the kangaroo, were regarded as food. When game was plentiful the blacks waxed fat and slept through half the day; when food was scarce they wandered and starved. But conservation or any means of regulating the supply was unheard of. If you did not spear the kangaroo, someone else would.

When the tribe camped on the river below the hut, the gins would stroll up, dusky piccanninies on their hips or straggling at their heels, to visit the

white woman. Her fair hair and grey eyes and the unaccountable fact that she covered her body with a strange material instead of going about stark naked like themselves, intrigued them hugely. When her son was born it was the gins who tended her in their own primitive fashion, searing the navel-cord with a stick from the camp-fire and placing the new-born mite in a wooden coolamon lined with soft bark, under the grim, harassed eyes of the gipsy. And as the infant grew up, he regarded his dusky godmothers and the pot-bellied youngsters who stole his bone toys and sometimes brought him bright coloured shells with the same grave unconcern as he did the other things in this strange world.

Although Ann enjoyed the occasional visits of the gins—the only company she ever had—in spite of the fact that she could not understand one word of their language, the two whites observed every caution in their dealings with them. The gipsy had a natural flair for languages, but the woman's refusal to embark beyond the only tongue she knew had a curious result. The lean-shanked, fierce-eyed warriors who had little or no contact with the woman, scarcely understood a word of her language, yet the gins rapidly picked up a working vocabulary which they adapted and twisted in their own fashion into a sort of pidgin-English.

Ann called her son Mark. The gipsy never questioned her choice of a name nor did he ever mention or discuss the boy's paternity. Whatever his thoughts on the subject, he kept them to himself. He had accepted Ann Smith with all faults—and his natural taciturnity left it at that. He treated the child kindly but without effusion, and neither parent

showed the slightest inclination toward spoiling the first-born.

The relations between John Sim and Ann were marked by a tacit forbearance on both sides. They were partners in a dangerous enterprise, and although each had naturally become part of the life of the other, there were no demonstrations of affection between them. In the absence of her man, Ann was beset with an anxiety that endured until his safe return, when all traces of her emotion immediately effaced themselves. The only occasion on which the gipsy had betrayed any feeling toward her was when the boy was born. Fear had beset him when he was confronted with the possibility of losing his mate; the feeling of impotency to avert the catastrophe or even to make things easier for the woman in travail hurt him. Her cries tortured him, yet, unable to help, he dared not leave her entirely to the mercies and primitive obstetrics of the gins. But when Ann recovered, the man's casual aloofness was at times replaced by a self-conscious brusqueness of manner as he went about the hut doing little extra duties to lighten her share of the work. If Ann noticed it, she made no sign. But sometimes of late when the man brought home a strangely marked shell or a soft possum-skin for the boy to play with, and would merely pause to drop it into the diminutive hands before walking on, she would wonder if John Sim would be as casual and emotionless toward his own child.

The shadows of the tall trees were lengthening across the clearing when a shrill call reached her ears. She felt relieved, yet there was an unusual note in the gin's shout that urged her to pick up the baby and cross the clearing to satisfy herself

that nothing was amiss. A young gin came bounding excitedly from the direction of the camp, her long skinny legs impelled by the same impatient urge that widened her eyes till they seemed to be all whites and made a hopeless jumble of her breathless message. Ann searched the empty landscape with an impatient admiration for the marvellous eyesight of the natives till at last she descried a dark moving object skirting the shoulder of a low hill. She stared, mystified for a while, then demanded of the excited gin at her side: "Is that him?"

The girl nodded emphatically and added, with a wealth of pantomime, "*Jackeroo! Jackeroo!*"

Then the gipsy topped a low rise and the woman stared with a shade of concern tingeing her exultation as to whether this daring raid might not bring reprisals in its train. John Sim, who had departed to foray on foot, was returning in style, mounted on a horse with a sheep slung in front of him, its tied legs dangling helplessly down the horse's shoulders. Of the little group that awaited his arrival, only the solemn-faced baby appeared quite unmoved. Ann's eyes were bright as they took in the results of the raid—the sheep and the bulging sack on Sim's back augured well for the larder. A tall, well-built warrior carrying a bundle of long spears hastened up to join the throng and inspected the horse with loud ejaculations of complete astonishment. Not only the strange animal itself but the fact that it was carrying a man and another animal on its back as well. He approached gingerly when the gipsy beckoned to him, touching the coarse wool of the sheep cautiously with one hand, his wide eyes never leaving the long bony head of the horse.

The gin took the laden sack from the rider; then the awe-struck natives scattered as the gipsy slipped stiffly to the ground. He called them together in their own tongue, warning them briefly but forcibly that the new animal was one of the family and not a target for spears. Then he led the way through the fringe of trees toward the hut, the bony mare dragging behind with outstretched neck.

As they sat round the fire after supper, the gipsy spoke of his trip in short disjointed sentences. The warm firelight lit his swarthy bearded features and his squat shadow darkened the back of the hut and merged into the dim recesses of the high-pitched roof. The woman sat quietly at one side of the fireplace, her eyes on the child nestling against the warm fleece of the sheep in the corner, one tiny grubby hand carefully smoothing its long coarse wool. To-morrow the sheep would be tethered on the grass outside the hut, but at night it would have to be protected from the prowling dingoes and the slinking curs from the blacks' camp that made night hideous with their wailing.

The gipsy chuckled quietly as he recounted the midnight taking of the mare. She was old but she was in foal and the man speculated gleefully at the thought of the additional booty he could now carry off. The new settlement at Rose Hill, fifteen miles this side of the Camp on Sydney Cove, had lately been the scene of the gipsy's depredations. Besides being closer, it was open on every side, whereas the main Camp was protected on two sides by water and the chances of being detected were infinitely greater. The theft of the sheep had been a comparatively easy matter. Only the previous day, a convict had been hanged for stealing a sheep at the Camp and

the shepherds had relied too much for protection on the thoughts of the deterrent. The gipsy made no mention of the hanging. In any case, he had stolen enough to get himself hanged a hundred times, but some things were better left unsaid.

Several months before, as the gipsy skulked around the outskirts of Rose Hill, faint calls for help drew him cautiously to a small clearing where he found a man pinned to the ground under a felled tree. For a time, his severely practical mind debated whether to leave him to the tender mercies of the wild dogs or risk his secret by exposing himself. For some reason, inexplicable to himself, he eventually freed the man, a new settler with a grant of land that he was clearing of timber, and carried him to his hut.

Brady, the settler, who had envisaged a hundred deaths as he lay pinned under the tree and had given up all hope of being rescued alive, asked no questions of his rescuer. The gipsy's wild appearance, the outlandish clothing made of the roughly tanned skins of the kangaroo, told the tale of the outlaw. Brady had kept the secret faithfully, and in return had kept the gipsy supplied with all the news of the colony. So when morning brought an outcry in the settlement on the discovery of some animal or property missing, the settler kept his mouth shut. The woods were full of escaped convicts—bushrangers, they call them—and there was no difficulty in finding shoulders to carry the blame.

Brady had just returned from a trip to Sydney by boat down the Parramatta River and was full of news. The settlement on the Cove was growing apace. The blacks down there were less hostile since the smallpox plague swept through them last

year killing them off like flies, when the stench of the rotting bodies of the victims among the rocks almost rendered the Camp uninhabitable. The old military guard was being replaced by a new regiment specially recruited in England to garrison the new colony. Part of this New South Wales Corps had arrived during Brady's visit and he spoke scathingly of their appearance and deportment.

"Sojers!" he ejaculated. "The owld lot was bad; Gawd only knows, but this lot's worse. Half av thim's bin lags an' tother half orte be!"

More convict ships had landed their sorry cargoes to swell the population of the colony. If conditions in the First Fleet had been bad, on these later transports they were infinitely worse. "Scores av thim died av starvation in their chains, but hot an' stinkin' as it was atween decks, the others hid the corpses an' shared the drops av wather that shud have bin theirs. I stood an' watched them bein' tuk off," he said. "Thim that cud, crawled ashore wake as wather, an' thim as cudn't an' was still aloive, was carted up to the 'orspital. Thim that was left was heaved over the side into the wather an' the tide left their rottin' carcasses along the shore like sea coal afther a storm."

A new surgeon had arrived on the *Neptune*, name of Wentworth—D'Arcy Wentworth—a good Irishman in the eyes of Brady, and there was a fire-eating young lieutenant of the New South Wales Corps that would be worth watching. His name was Macarthur; he had a nice young wife and baby, and if Brady was any judge, things would be lively in his neighbourhood.

Governor Phillip was going round with a worried look—and little wonder, getting all those shiploads

of lags and soldiers dumped on him when there was a famine in the Camp already. The weekly ration was two and a half pounds of weevily flour, a couple of pounds of rice, and the same of salt horse, as hard as the hobs of hell and with a smell that would frighten the French. The new soldiers were well clothed but the old guard was in rags, and a whole company paraded barefoot without a pair of shoes between them.

The gipsy yawned and stretched his stiff legs. He had not slept at all the previous night and he must be up at daylight to haul up his fish-trap from the river before the blacks helped themselves to its contents. The woman put a log on the fire and raked the glowing coals around it, then banked it for the night under a mound of soft white ashes. From the dark shadows of the corner she picked up her baby nestling sound asleep against the sheep's warm belly, his little fingers entwined in its coarse wool. The gipsy took a final look at the calf-pen and up at the stars twinkling like molten silver in the cloudless indigo sky, then he shut the heavy door and bolted it securely for the night. The act was a ceremony that never failed to arouse a deep feeling of satisfaction within him.

The same happy realization of their independence, revived by the news of the raw little settlement they had left behind, was stealing soporifically over the woman on the rough bed in the corner. Outlaws they were, self-appointed exiles at that, living far from their kin; but life possessed something that an occasional empty stomach or the ever-present threat of danger could not efface. They were under no master. They were free.

CHAPTER IV

FOR a long time the two men in the shadow of the big gum on the hill-side had crouched motionless, hardly exchanging a word. So cunningly were they blended into the pattern of light and shadow that any one less keen-eyed than a native might have passed close to their motionless forms without noticing them. The gipsy lay on his stomach, his bearded chin supported on his forearms; his musket, polished and worn by constant use, lay close by his side, and his dark features wore an anxious look. An arm's length away, a native squatted fingering the red boomerang in his hand, his spears on the ground before him pointing in the direction that their eyes watched so intently.

The sun-bathed landscape was dusted with a delicate blue haze that softly merged the distant frowning ramparts of the west into the blue of the sky above. Apart from the alert watchful attitude of the two men, the scene was one of peace—a drowsy ineffable quality full of the tremendous silence that overhung them. The wide cloudless sky was empty and bare save for the dazzling presence of the sun and an almost invisible speck, away high up, that marked the slow dark pinions of an eaglehawk. Even the raucous croak of a distant crow did not intrude on the silence, and the gloriously round chortling note of a magpie in the tall boughs above seemed only to occur for the purpose of calling attention to the reigning stillness.

Along the wide valley below them, the cattle were spread out. Over four-score sleek black animals

grazing contentedly through the lush green grass or camping in the shade with eyes half closed, chewing the cud, while their tails switched lazily and incessantly at the flies that abounded on this warm day of early summer. But it was not the cattle that was causing all the concern but something momentarily hidden on the low round hill across the valley. The crow's-feet gathered at the corners of the gipsy's eyes as he peered anxiously across, muttering to himself: "He's got a glass with him, too, the dog!" Presently the figure opposite came into full view—a man strongly built and apparently well clothed, with a cabbage-tree hat on his head and a musket in his hand. He replaced the marine glass in his pocket with an air of supreme satisfaction, then after a final leisurely survey of the prosperous pastoral scene, he turned and retraced his way toward the north.

The naked savage peered resentfully after the distant retreating back, the look in his smoky brown eyes translated to the twitching of his dark fingers round the boomerang. Only the gipsy's grim features betrayed the seriousness of his feelings. Whereas the aboriginal's thoughts revolved round killing for killing's sake, prompted by the irresistible temptation of the retreating back of a stranger intruding on his native preserves, the gipsy brooded darkly over the result of the news that the spy was taking back to the settlement with him. A bullet could still stop that news; or, better still, a nod to the savage at his side and only the man's body full of spear wounds might be found by the searchers. But the sign was not made. At length he rose slowly to his feet and with the silent and

somewhat puzzled native at his side, made his way back to the hut.

At his low whistle as he entered the clearing, the barred door was cautiously opened, and the woman emerged, followed by two youngsters and a half a dozen piebald lambs that pushed quickly past them, glad to be out in the sun again. Ann's thin features were tanned and weatherbeaten with her seven years of exile, and her eyes lost none of their anxiety when she saw the gipsy's troubled face.

Mark, a sturdy quiet-eyed youngster of six, was at her side, an odd little figure in overalls of kangaroo skin, his little round head topped with a thatch of fair hair bleached flaxen by the sun, and his bare feet as brown as the ground they stood on. There was no doubt whatever about the parentage of the younger boy. The golden-brown skin of the restless little figure with the deep brown gipsy eyes laden to the brim with mischief and the thin curved nose were an unmistakable heritage. At four, he ran as naked as the dark-skinned boys he bullied unmercifully in the blacks' camp on the river. Both youngsters spoke the native tongue with greater ease and proficiency than the language of their mother. And growing up in their midst they imbibed the native outlook and customs with their speech while they bade fair to surpass their quick-eyed dusky mentors at their own games.

Catching sight of the native skirting the far side of the clearing, they scampered after him to ply him with a torrent of questions in his own tongue. "Why had they been shut up all day with their mother and the lambs? Why had Mimmy, the old mare, and her foal, as well as the other filly and the horse John rode, all been kept in the yard when

they should have been out at grass? What had happened to make John so serious?"

The gipsy entered the hut in silence and placed his musket in the rack out of reach of the children. Ann followed, curbing the questions that itched her tongue, and commenced cleaning up the traces of occupation of two restive children and a pack of lambs when everything out of doors conspired to make their imprisonment the more irksome. The gipsy seated himself on the block beside the fire-place, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees to gaze darkly into the glowing embers. At length the woman broke the silence.

"What was it, John?"

"Somebody from the Camp. A fellow with a spy-glass."

"What did he see?"

"Most o' the kylies." The gipsy continued to glower into the heart of the fire, his broad back to the woman.

"An' he's takin' back the news?" There was more than a hint of accusation in the hardening tones, but it was apparently lost on the gipsy. The woman took up a position on the opposite side of the hearth and her narrowed eyes concentrated on the brooding figure.

"What are you goin' to do, John Sim?" she demanded with an insistent note in her voice. "Are we goin' to sit here till the sojers come an' drive off our cattle, burn the roof over our heads an' drag us back to slavery an' the lash?"

The gipsy's arm swept irritably at her.

"Be quiet, woman!"

Her grey eyes glinted threateningly as they had

not done in the years since their first meeting above Sydney Cove.

"Before I let myself be taken, John Sim, I'll rub myself wi' charcoal an' hide in a bark gunyah wi' the blacks!" She turned abruptly on her heel and marched out of the hut, a tigress seething with a cold ruthless flame that would carry her to any lengths to protect her offspring, her home and her liberty.

When the long beams of the setting sun streamed through the loopholes in the western wall and began to climb the opposite wall, the man stirred. He rose abruptly and left the hut without a word, but there was an air of purpose about him that spoke of a decision reached. He returned with the milking cows and penned their calves for the night; the evening meal was eaten in silence and the gipsy, still preoccupied, retired to bed.

He rose before daylight and had the bay horse bridled at the door while the kookaburras were still greeting the dawn with raucous peals of laughter and the black-and-white magpies in the tall trees were adding their liquid notes to the hubbub. He made a hasty meal, stuffing his capacious pockets with food for a journey, then turned to the woman as he rose to depart.

"I'm goin' to Parramatta to see Brady," he said gruffly. "An' I'm stoppin' there till I hear what they'll be doin', so stop handy about the place. Young Mark can get the calves in o' nights an' he'd better ride the owld mare. Tell him to keep away from the young bull!" He stuck a pair of pistols in his belt, led the bay horse close to a stump, and mounted bare-back with an agility that belied his years and bulk.

He rode steadily down to the ford, concealing his tracks with even more care than usual; on the farther bank he dismounted and covered the hoof tracks in the soft sand. The bay horse was in fine fettle. He was the old mare's first foal and a shapelier animal than his dam, short-backed and sound-legged, with a big intelligent eye full of life and an ever-present gleam of mischief.

In spite of his inherent roving tendencies, John Sim felt no desire to break camp again and leave the fertile pastures he had discovered and occupied for the past seven years. In the first place, he did not know where to go. In the natives' company, he had hunted for miles around and knew that only two alternatives offered.

The first was to drive the cattle down to the deep, rock-walled valley to the west—the place the blacks called the valley of the Pattagorang, the grey kangaroo—but he knew they would not willingly stay on the sparse herbage there and would be continually breaking back to the lush pastures where they had been born and bred. Farther still to the west, the high rugged mountains presented an impenetrable barrier to the cattle. It would be useless to try and surmount them even though good country lay beyond.

Toward the south-west lay a wild stretch of barren land densely timbered with the straight, dark, rough-barked trees they called the ironbark—a stony, broken country where there was no grass. If he pushed far beyond that and over the southern mountains he might find another haven, but it would be a journey fraught with difficulties at this time of the year when water was scarce.

In addition, the blacks over there were a hostile

tribe speaking a strange language, and the whole business of settling down and fighting for a foothold for himself and his cattle would have to be repeated. Seven years ago, with the savage whistle of the lash fresh in his ears, he would have attempted it without question: now he realized the difficulties more keenly. He had acquired sufficient knowledge of the natives and their innate treachery to realize how lucky he and Ann had been to survive. Still the fact remained that they were outlaws and outlaws they must remain.

The future as he gloomily envisaged it must of necessity be a continual retreat farther and farther inland, always beyond the farthest outpost of the expanding white settlements. How long that process must go on lay mercifully hidden in the mists of the future. He knew that for himself, the escaped convict, the man who reived the Government cattle and who had harried the settlements ever since, there remained but two prospects—outlawry or death.

But he had no wish to die. In spite of the grim hardships he had endured, the lack of food, the continuous state of peril they lived in among the savage blacks, and above all the complete strangeness of this new land, he had nevertheless come to like it. It was totally dissimilar, lacking a single link with the Old Country. The birds, the animals, the grasses, the trees, even the seasons were different. He could not picture the England he knew overrun with these big hopping kangaroos, or with flocks of emus like the great birds flouncing ahead of him there now, for all the world like a man running with a sheaf of corn under each arm.

Yet, in spite of it all, the nostalgia for England was abating. There was something here in the tang

of the air that roused a fierce independent spirit in the breast, that made a man glad to be alive. Even the degraded looking savages had taught him, a gipsy born in the lore of the woods, things that had opened wide his eyes. They could pick up and follow the tracks of any animal over a country hard as iron. Their wonderful eyesight and instinct were equalled by their ability to conceal themselves and move unseen through their natural habitat.

What a lot these Englishmen in the settlements had to learn and what a lot they would have to unlearn before this country accepted them! There they were, still huddling on the seaboard after seven years of occupation; still trying to grow crops and raise cattle and sheep on the sour barren coastal country, all unaware of the pastoral paradise that lay inland. Why! the poorest of his cattle were superior to the best they had in the settlements—in size, in constitution and in quality. It amazed him to compare the miserable handful of cattle he had lifted, when he and Ann escaped, with the sleek black animals that now moved contentedly over his pastures.

His herd had grown to over eighty head, thanks to an exceptional percentage of heifer calves and the addition of a cow or two whose convict herd had grown over careless. At the settlement a cow was worth £80. Think of it! John Sim, the gipsy, the convict, the outlaw, one of the richest men in the colony! Owning twice as many cattle as the entire settlement possessed—and nobody even imagined his existence or the existence of his herd! Money he had none, but neither had any one else in the colony. Barter was the only medium: so many sheep for a cow or for a horse; so many bushels of

wheat for a boat; or, when it came to small everyday matters of commerce, there was rum.

Rum was the medium that every one understood. Food was not bought—the Government issued that weekly out of store. But if a man fancied a coat or a pair of shoes or silver buckles or a wife, the value was calculated in quarts or gallons.

It was not yet sundown when he drew rein in the shelter of the trees above Brady's clearing. He could not show himself there till after dark so he let the horse graze in a little grassy pocket and munched some dry bread and cooked possum while he waited. He caught an occasional glimpse of Brady pottering about outside the hut. He would have to find some way of calling him out; things were more difficult than ever since Brady had brought that slattern to live with him. It would be fatal to be seen by that loose-tongued slut.

Farther on, he could see Williams, the neighbouring settler, a drunken, lazy oaf who divided his time between squabbling with his equally foul-mouthed wife and thrashing her till she roused the neighbours with her shrieks. There seemed to be some sort of orgy going on there now. Williams, seated at the door of his hut in the full rays of the setting sun, was brandishing a bottle to the tuneless dirge of a drunken song.

The red ball of the sun hung on the black-lipped horizon in a maddening leisurely fashion; even when it sank out of sight the twilight seemed to linger an unusually long time. Up among the trees the evening air was warm and caressing and the birds went about the business of picking their roosting-places for the night to the accompaniment of final bursts of song, interspersed with sudden flutterings



as one was ousted from its place by a late arrival. The warm earthy smell that hung faintly over Brady's patch of potatoes and corn was blotted out by an acrid whiff of wood-smoke from the hut and a hint of something cooking.

Then at last the gipsy ventured out of his hiding-place, picking his way carefully toward the hut. At his low whistle, a dog came bounding toward him. It was a native mongrel that he had trained himself and given to Brady, and it welcomed its late master effusively. Through the open door he caught sight of Brady in the smoke-hazed interior bending over the fire. Of the woman there was no sign. The gipsy whistled cautiously until the man within threw up his head in a listening attitude, then advanced till his bulk filled the doorway.

"Who's there?"

The low whistle was repeated from the darkness and the man stepped forward clear of the hut. "Who is it?" he challenged again.

"It's me, Brady." The quiet voice sounded so close that the man turned with a hasty start, then his attitude relaxed.

"Come on in. I'm be meself." He turned back to the doorway and waited.

"Where's the woman?" came a cautious whisper from the shadow.

"Gone," Brady replied laconically and entered the hut.

The gipsy paused on the threshold, his eyes rapidly searching the frowsy interior, then slipped inside, closed the heavy door, and seated himself on the dirty tumbled blankets on the bark bed in the darkest corner.

"Did she leave ye?"

The man bending over the black pot shrugged his shoulders non-committally.

"She did in a way." He settled himself on a low block of wood beside the open fireplace. "Williams an' his woman an' her brat were goin' down to Sydney in the boat so I sent Green wi' them for a bag o' rice. They all got roarin' drunk o' coorse, an' on the way back they started an argymint an' upsit the boat. Williams gets howld o' the bag o' rice as they fell into the wather, an' drunk an' all as he wuz, brung it ashore. They niver found the wimmen not for a coupla days so Oi'm a widderer again—an' moighty plazed about ut!"

"Then who's Williams drinkin' wi' now?"

Brady snorted.

"He buried the drowned woman an' her brat at his door, an' there he sits the day long. He pours a glass o' rum for hisself, then he pours another an' empties it on the grave, an' him lamentin' how much he loved her—an' him rememberin' how *she* loved the rum!" He spat derisively into the fire and fell silent. After a while he turned his head and glanced curiously at the dim bulk of the man in the shadows.

"Ever come across a herd o' wild cattle back there in the woods?" he inquired.

The gipsy glanced sharply back.

"What d'ye mean?"

"Just a whisper I heard this evenin'. Henery Hacking that goes out shooting kangyroos an' other meat came tearin' back an' I hears him tellin' Parson Marsden that he's foun' a whole tribe o' cattle in the woods. Looks like we'll have a taste o' fresh meat. It'll be the first for many a year—barrin' what yerself brings in on the quiet."

"Did Hacking rest here in Parramatta?"

"Not him! He's too set up wi' the news an' what he's like to get from the new Governor for it. Off he goes to Sydney wid owld Flog-'em hard on his heels."

"*New Governor*, did ye say?"

"Aye, an' praise be! Major Bloody Grose an' his sojers don't run things anny more, although Johnny Macarthur's still cock o' the walk here at Parra-matta. But Cap'n Hunter's guv-ner now, an' plaze God we'll have an aisier time!"

"Him that was cap'n o' the *Sirius*?"

"The same."

The gipsy, pondering deeply, spoke his thoughts aloud.

"I wonder what he'll do wi' the kylie!"

Brady looked up with keen interest.

"So ye know about them."

Sim started hastily, then collecting himself he peered fixedly at the man by the fireside.

"I *do* know about them, Brady," he replied slowly. "*Because they belong to me!*"

"Mother o' God!" Brady started to his feet and regarded the man in the shadows with mingled fear and awe.

"Listen to me! I want to know what they're plannin' to do wi' them—an' I want you to find out for me."

Brady nodded hurriedly.

"Marsden shud be back i' the mornin'. It's on'y fifteen mile, an' he praches in Sydney av a Sunday mornin' an' walks back to prache here in the afther-noon. But wan thing I do know—he'll be chasin' afther thim cows to see what he can git for hisself. An' Macarthur'll be on his heels. Since he got that grant av a hunderd acres here he's bin addin' to't

here an' addin' to't there. An' he's got a quare idea that thim rough sheep av his are improvin' on the counthry an' goin' to grow fine wool instid o' the goat hair they grow now."

"Well, maybe he's right. But anyway, I'll be waitin' for your news in the woods beyant the corn." The gipsy rose and moved toward the door.

"Shtop an' make yer bed in the corner, man. Ye'll be safe."

But John Sim shook his shaggy head decisively and passed out into the darkness.

The fears that had tortured the woman, penned with her children in the lonely hut, were still mirrored in the anxious eyes that watched the return of her man. The sun had not long risen and although the gipsy appeared his stocky, stolid self, the bay colt betrayed the signs of a long night ride. It still strode along with its effortless raking stride, but its head hung lower, the outstretched neck had lost its proud arch, and dark patches of sweat marked its hollows and the tucked-up flanks.

Young Mark stood squarely by his mother's side, his blue eyes intent on the approaching rider. Ann had warned the boys of the threatened danger and had kept them close to the hut for the past two days till their dark-skinned playmates, missing them, had wandered up to transfer the scene of their fun to the sheltered clearing.

The warning sat lightly on young Jack. The fact that other light-skinned people existed besides his parents and Mark had never occurred to him, and their appearance would have occasioned more curiosity than fear in his mischievous brown eyes. He clung to his mother's skirt with one hand, swinging

his naked little body rhythmically to and fro from it, and the only thoughts that passed through his mind were concerned with the booty that the gipsy might bring with him. The delightful novelty and possible surprises of the contents of the bags held an intriguing interest for him, but this morning as the rider drew closer his lips pouted with dismay—the gipsy came empty-handed. This was a major tragedy.

But just as the tired horse came to a halt before them and the gipsy slipped stiffly to the ground redolent of the horse-sweat that stained the legs of his trousers, the boys' eyes brightened at something slung over one broad shoulder. Ann's eyes had seen it too. They opened wide with apprehension and dismay, and a gust of ugly hidden memories caught her breath at the sight of the lash. It fell to the ground at their feet as the gipsy dismounted. Young Jacky darted forward with a crow of delight and snatched up the short handle, but the woman shrank back from the black thong as though it were a snake.

The bay horse shook his head where the sweat had caked under the bridle before stalking slowly off to roll luxuriously in the dust with deep grunts of enjoyment. As the gipsy turned, bridle in hand, the woman's apprehensive eyes met his; she sensed tragedy.

"John . . . where did you get it?"

The man paused casually and she noticed the black beard and lined features grey with dust and the eyes bloodshot and weary.

"A gang tuk to their overseer—an' then tuk to the woods. That's all they left. It'll come in handy for drivin' the kylies." As he moved stiffly on

toward the hut the woman overtook him and entered first. Water lay ready in a wooden coolamon near the door to wash the dust off if he wanted to, but the fish still had to be cooked. The man's last words haunted her ears and her mouth was tight set as she bent over the glowing coals.

Driving the cattle! So they had to move on! Well, better to leave the home she had come to love in her emotionless fashion, the home where her children had been born; better to face the unknown with its dangers and hardships, which to them were no longer unknown, than to be dragged back to serfdom and a bestiality that was worse than death.

At length the gipsy wiped his bearded lips with the back of his hand and turned toward the woman seated on the edge of the rough bed, trying hard to conceal her impatience.

"The Guv'nor's comin' out to look for hisself," he remarked heavily.

"When? . . . Now?" The woman's voice was sharp and edgy.

The bearded head shook slowly.

"Cap'n Hunter o' the *Sirius* is Guv'nor now . . . an' he wants to see the kylies hisself. That means he don't know yet what he'll do wi' them."

"And are we going to wait for him to come and take 'em?"

"Nobody knows about us. They reckoned the kylies strayed away be themselves. If a lag had tuk 'em he would ha' killed an' et 'em, sez they. In the mornin' I'm goin' that way"—his sinewy arm pointed to the south-west—"to look for new country. I'll be back in three or four days—in time to meet all the nobs!"

"An' what if they come afore?"

"The blacks'll watch for 'em an' tell ye. This evenin' I'll drive the young cattle an' the oxen up the big valley that runs into the hills. We'll leave the old cows an' the young bull an' his tribe to meet the visitors. If he catches sight o' them he'll make 'em run—Guv'nor or no. Dowse the fire in the daytime an' keep to the hut, or if a big party comes, take to the hills wi' the kylie. I'm goin' to have a sleep now."

CHAPTER V

"By gad, gentlemen, as fine a stretch of country as I've set eyes on this side of England!"

Captain John Hunter paused on the summit of a grassy ridge to survey the landscape, recover his wind and mop the perspiration from his brow. The weather was hot—too hot to go tramping round the country in clothes that were built for the quarter-deck and the chilly northern hemisphere. The Governor fanned himself with his heavy three-cornered hat and cast an envious glance at the shady cabbage-tree hat under which the red good-humoured face of Judge-Advocate Collins perspired. For all his length of sojourn in the colony, that worthy's cloth coat was almost as heavy and unsuitable for the occasion as the Governor's blue uniform with its fly-away tails and brass buttons. Captain Waterhouse and Mr Bass, the surgeon of the *Reliance*, were equally ill equipped for a long march over rough country.

"How much farther, think you, Hacking?"

A burly sun-tanned man with a musket on his shoulder detached himself from the little group of soldiers and convict servants, and touched his forelock.

"It's nigh two league to where I sighted 'em, sir, but we may come on 'em any time now."

"All right, then! Move cautiously ahead and keep your weather eye open."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The officers tugged at their neckwear again, made another ineffectual pass at the pestering clouds of

flies, and moved off downhill in the wake of the thickset figure of the guide. To their left flowed the deep waters of the river they had named the Nepean, and all ahead of them stretched a wide undulating tract of waving grassland dotted with stately trees that gave it the appearance of a great park. Flocks of wild duck whirred up from every pond, long-legged cranes inspected them with curiosity before flapping clumsily off into graceful flight, and occasionally a pair of black swans rose with a scuttering of water to follow their long necks to some undisturbed pool.

"A regular paradise, gentlemen!—if it were not for the damned insects."

Captain Waterhouse cordially agreed and kept his eyes roving over the landscape. What a place to secure a grant! A few hundred acres here while he had the ear of the Governor and he would have the laugh on those military land-grabbers back at Parramatta and Sydney.

The party came to a sudden halt. Someone pointed to the guide, frenziedly gesticulating from the crest of a round hill ahead, and with one accord they hastened their steps toward him. Breathlessly they joined the jubilant Hacking ensconced behind the few bushes that fringed the summit.

"Look, sir! There they are!"

A line of eager heads craned for a better view of the shallow valley that stretched below them, and the guide swelled proudly to the excited gasps that responded to the sight of the herd grazing peacefully below. The cattle moved leisurely through the pasture, picking a dainty mouthful here and there, replete and carefree. The sun glinted warmly on

the sleekness of their well-filled hides and drew an exclamation from the Governor.

"They're the same, Collins! They're the same cattle we brought from the Cape on the *Sirius*. I lived with them long enough to know those horns, that hump on the shoulder and the thin tail. But, gad, what an improvement! They're twice the size!"

"We have nothing in the colony to equal them!" agreed Captain Waterhouse.

"It's this country that has done it! Gad, gentlemen, Captain Phillip was right. It's a wonderful country, and who knows what we have still to find. But let us get closer. Not all of us. Come along, Hacking, I want to count them."

The four officers and the guide circled the base of the hill and pushed forward to a small knoll toward which the cattle were moving, and ensconced themselves for a perfect view of the herd.

"Thirty-six including calves!" announced the Governor. "What do you make it, Mr Bass?"

"Thirty-seven, sir. There are two close together under that tree."

"Good!" The Governor turned to eye his companions reflectively. "I would like to take back some evidence of our find, gentlemen. I'm sure Captain Phillip will be hugely interested even though he has returned to England. If my memory serves me right, two of the lost cows were his private property, therefore a share of the increase must belong to him. Hacking . . . do you try to find a calf to take back with us."

The guide hesitated with a doubtful look at the herd drifting past. He did not like the look of those wide flat horns, and how he could be expected to

capture single-handed a fleet and frisky calf was more than he knew. Still, an order was an order, and he hitched his trousers and picked up his musket. By this time, more than half the herd had moved past, and at the sudden appearance of the man practically in their midst, a warning "whoof" dispelled every atom of lethargy and placidity from the herd; in a flash they turned and fled headlong. Recovering, after a short burst, from the fright that had stampeded them, the cows wheeled and drew together, heads high and horns tossing threateningly to face the intruder. The calves hung close to the black flanks of their dams, watching the hesitant approach of the solitary man. Suddenly, Hacking's cautious progress came to a dead stop. The four officers, a trifle nonplussed, saw him turn and throw an alarmed glance back in their direction. And, as a low menacing rumble reached their ears, they also scrambled to their feet with one accord and glanced hastily to their right flank.

A huge black bull had suddenly materialized there and was covering the ground toward them with swift businesslike strides. One glimpse of the menace of the heavy-humped shoulders, the wide flat horns, the dripping black muzzle and the bellicose red eyes was enough for them. As one man, they turned and fled for the distant trees with the Governor in the lead.

The bull increased his pace to a shambling trot that ate up the distance between them. Up on the ridge, the handful of leaderless soldiers milled helplessly about. The convicts guffawed and capered excitedly at the undignified gait and predicament of their lords and masters. The Governor's gold-braided hat flew off into the grass, but the owner

never noticed the loss in his panting rush. He could almost feel the bull's hot breath on his frantic heels and the nearest sapling was still a hundred yards away. The Judge-Advocate, puffing desperately along behind him, died a hundred deaths in half as many yards. His eyes bulged; his musket was gone. The long grass tangled and twisted itself round his short sturdy legs and impeded his progress.

A shot rang out and the distressed quartet leaped galvanically forward to a final effort. A branch concealed in the long grass got between the Judge-Advocate's legs; he tripped and fell flat on his face with a despairing howl. As he frenziedly kicked and struggled to free himself, the Governor threw a hasty glance back over his shoulder. Close behind him the surgeon and Captain Waterhouse puffed piteously along. Farther back, he saw the Head of the Judiciary struggling frantically on the ground and close behind him, a great black body lay half submerged in the grass, jerking spasmodically in the throes of death.

Captain Hunter halted. His two subordinates barely noticed him as they shot unceremoniously past, but a few more yards and the state of affairs dawned on them and they stopped. Mr Bass, after a quick glance at the dying bull to make sure that the pursuit was really ended, sank exhausted to the ground and clutched at his thumping heart. Captain Waterhouse, with the perspiration streaming down his purple face, slowly retraced his steps to assist in the liberation of the Judge-Advocate who, at the touch of the Governor's helping hand, thought the bull was upon him, and redoubled his efforts.

Beyond the heaving dark bulk on the ground, Henry Hacking stood, ramrod in hand, hastily re-

loading his musket and wondering, with increasing panic, whether he would be hanged or merely flogged for destroying Government property.

Captain Hunter was the first to recover coherent speech. He stood over the dead bull, mopping his red perspiring face and tearing open his stock to facilitate his breathing; then he noticed the shame-faced quartermaster hesitating in the background and beckoned him forward. The man stared incredulously at his leader's outstretched hand, then, with a mixture of awe and unbelief in his own senses, allowed his great limp paw to be heartily shaken.

"Thank ye, Hacking! We owe much to your coolness and marksmanship, and we will not forget it."

Some hours later, the party reclined contentedly in the shade of the trees whose sanctuary had recently seemed so desirable for other reasons than as a haven from the rays of the sun. Their stomachs were surfeited with the greatest luxury the colony could imagine—fresh beef in unlimited quantities. But the sun was beginning to drop toward the west and the long backward journey had to be faced. The party of soldiers and convicts grouped round the fire some distance away were still nibbling at devilled bones although gorged with more beef than had ever come their way in a lifetime. The Governor turned reflectively toward his three companions.

"Well, gentlemen, our journey has not been in vain."

Captain Waterhouse cleared his throat. The moment appeared opportune for the plan that had occupied his mind all day, with the exception of the interlude belonging solely to the bull.

"Might I petition your Excellency. . . . What I mean to say is . . . er . . . this fine stretch of country which appears to be tenanted only by wild cattle and kangaroos . . ."

"Your pardon, Captain." The Governor held up a warning hand; a faint smile played round his lips and lit a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Before we discuss the larger problem, there is the question of the carcass. It pains me deeply when I consider that we must abandon beef that would be of such benefit to the sick at the settlement. We will carry back as much as possible, but we are so far removed from Parramatta that to return for more would be futile. . . ."

"Now, as to the future of these Cowpastures"—Captain Waterhouse bent eagerly forward—"I am fully convinced that these are the descendants of the cattle that strayed away from Sydney Cove after Captain Phillip landed. Although we lost sight of the herd after the leader was shot, there is little doubt that they will return to this fertile spot where they have been all these years. Now it might be possible to drive them to the settlement for slaughter. But I have another plan—Are you listening, Mr Collins?"

The Judge-Advocate nodded vigorously and leaned forward attentively.

"It is my wish that the cattle remain here undisturbed to act as a reserve food-supply for the colony. On our return, Mr Collins, you will frame an Order proclaiming these Cowpastures a Government Reserve and forbidding any man to harry or destroy the cattle under pain of death."

He leaned back against the tree-trunk with an air of complete satisfaction. Mr Collins made a

rapid mental note of the injunction, and Mr Bass nodded acquiescence. What little interest he might have had in the disposal of the land had been dispelled by that infernal bull. This country life was not to his liking. His eyes envisaged with greater pleasure a long serrated coastline bristling with sharp high headlands and hidden rivers, with himself in the stern sheets of a small craft conning and charting as they voyaged slowly along.

Only Captain Waterhouse appeared disconsolate. His present grant of land seemed a paltry, sparse-grassed plot compared to all this pastoral wealth—and he had bargained on getting in ahead of Macarthur and those other fellows. However, he would at least make their mouths water with his description of the forbidden paradise when he got back.

From a high forest ridge that ran down like a long buttress from the dark rugged hills, Ann caught occasional distant glimpses of the invaders. Twenty-four hours before they appeared she had news of their approach and even of their numbers. The Governor and his officers may have observed a thin pencil of smoke rising in broken intervals and put it down casually to a native cooking his meal; but had they known the purport and the exactitude of the message that was being broadcast and read by every black within a score of miles, their opinions of the low intelligence of "the depraved savages" would have undergone instant revision.

The blacks immediately vacated their camp on the river and moved several miles up toward the hills. Ann and her boys went with them, leading the old mare packed with sheep-skins and blankets—all their bedding—and their more valuable tools

and weapons and a quantity of food. Behind them the hut lay barred and silent, and the woman turned at the edge of the clearing for a last look at the bark roof that had sheltered her for so long. Then swiftly repressing the fugitive flicker of sentiment, she called sharply to Mark whose job was to drive the sheep and lambs and to keep the young horses following in the wake of the pack mare.

Far ahead of her little cavalcade straggled the old men and the gins, the latter loaded with camp gear, wooden vessels and babies, yet keeping up a shrill giggling conversation in spite of the heavy burdens. Away in front of them strode their lords and masters carrying spears and boomerangs with an occasional stone-tomahawk stuck in a belt of twisted human hair. The indignity of manual labour or portorage was not for warriors.

Young Jacky held approximately the same ideas. His cheerful independent soul hailed the exodus as a high adventure. Ann pushed ahead, grim and angular, leading the packhorse with the long-legged, woolly-tailed foal doddering at her heels. Mark ranged behind trying to keep the straggling sheep in sight of the mare. When the yearling filly took it into her head to prospect a patch of grass far off the line of march, Mark had to abandon his flock and race round with a shout and a well-aimed stick to head the filly back, by which time his lambs had scattered again. But Jacky refused to be tied to any form of responsibility. He was a warrior. One small grimy fist carried the two miniature spears that old You-warree had made for him, the other clutched a small red boomerang, and he picked his own course, strutting along naked and barefooted, with his little round stomach sticking out and his

impudent brown eyes roving the grass tufts for a possible snake or lizard to spear, and scrutinizing every tree for wild bees' nests or the possibility of fat white grubs.

They passed the night on the banks of a little creek whose clear waters tumbled down over a series of miniature falls. By the time the warm darkness closed over them, Ann was ready to drop exhausted into sleep. Her toil-worn hands were torn and bleeding with cutting bushes to make a rough pen for the sheep, and with dragging dry wood to feed the circle of fires she lit around their little camp to keep off the blacks' dogs and the dingoes whose blood-curdling howling had already started up in the range. Jacky was first asleep; as soon as he finished supper he curled himself up on a sheep-skin on the ground against the sheep break, his spears stuck in the ground near his head in regular blackfellow fashion. Ann spread the remaining sheep-skins close beside him and, after a round of the fires, lay down between him and Mark with her worldly goods piled beside her and a loaded pistol close at hand.

Next day she actually felt relieved when a gin raced in with the news that the invaders were in sight. The suspense of waiting and watching and hoping that the gipsy had seen the signal-smokes in time to hurry back, was beginning to tell on her. She followed the gin to the crest of the ridge and, although she rarely caught sight of the distant black dots of figures, the keen-eyed native in the branches above kept her informed of their movements and of the positions of the stalking warriors who followed every move of the white explorers and still remained invisible to them.

The gin's wild excitement when the bull attacked the white men rendered her speech totally incoherent and added to the suspense of the anxious listener. Then came the distant crack of the musket and Ann's heart seemed to stop in her breast. What was happening? Were they starting to shoot the cattle indiscriminately? She waited, torn with anxiety, for further shots, but none came. They had killed the bull. She remembered him as a calf trotting by his mother's side on that desperate drive from Farm Cove, seven long years ago. He had been speared in the shoulder in an early affray with the natives, and ever since, his soured temper had roused at the sight of any one on foot. Their herd was depleted by one. Nevertheless, she felt mildly thankful they had shot a bull and not a cow. Cows were precious as the begetters of calves to swell the herd, but only the best of the males were kept as bulls and the balance turned into bullocks for beef.

Her suspense endured while the Governor's party leisurely feasted, and all sorts of possibilities tortured her active mind. The party might camp beside that mountain of beef, living on it and exploring the vicinity till the supply was exhausted or went bad. Eventually they must discover the traces of white habitation, then all would be irretrievably lost.

At length the gin signalled that the party was departing and without a moment's delay Ann hurried back to the camp and packed up. She left the boys to follow with the slower moving animals and hurried on with the packhorse, knowing well that the blacks shadowing the explorers would lose no time in plundering the carcass of the bull. The

sight of the hut warmed her heart again, but she only paused to dump the belongings inside and hastened on, dragging the unwilling mare toward the fallen bull with the gawky, round-eyed foal plodding behind.

Her heart sank at sight of the excited blacks crowded round the spot brandishing their long spears and capering with joy at the prospect of the feast, then her jaw set determinedly. Blacks or no, she would take her share of the meat, forcibly if necessary, in defiance of the entire tribe. So she hurried on through the long grass with the light of battle glinting in her eye.

Then as she drew near, the chattering, shouting mob waved their spears in cheerful excited greeting, and as they parted to let her pass she caught a quick glimpse of a figure bending over the fallen beast—a thickset, black-bearded man who was not naked like the rest of the heathen crew. Her heart gave a wild bound and her stern features and all the tension of her body relaxed. Her man had come back.

The gipsy looked up and saw a grim, ruthless-eyed woman with wisps of faded hair straggling down her lined features striding through the naked blacks with the old mare dragging at the end of the halter with outstretched neck. He straightened his back and stood up, his arms bloody to the elbows; and as he glimpsed the moment of surprise and the transformation that wiped the hard lines and the steely glint from the eyes, and replaced them for a transient moment with something deeper than mere relief at his presence, his brown eyes gleamed proudly on his mate. Then he brushed off

the clustering flies and helped her drag the sidling nervous mare closer to the reeking carcass.

"We'll take all the meat the horses can carry an' leave the rest to the tribe," he said gruffly. Their moment had passed. Life resumed its normal course again.

CHAPTER VI

THE long hot summer passed smoothly and almost imperceptibly into winter. Autumn as a distinct season did not seem to exist in this new land. There were no rosy-cheeked apples and falling leaves to herald the approach of winter; only a gradual shortening of the days or an occasional cooler night gave warning of more to come; but the trees remained clothed in green all the year round and only a lull in the growth of the grass during the colder weather evidenced the fact that nature was enjoying a short nap. An occasional mist blanketed the land and sometimes frost covered the grass with a silvery white mantle, but a frosty night was always followed by a day of sparkling, unbroken sunshine.

Even the advent of spring was undefined by any widespread burgeoning of blossom or fresh green leaves on the trees. The imperceptibly lengthening days, the gradually increasing warmth of the sun that had never hidden himself away for more than a few showery days at most throughout the winter months, a quickening and shooting in the grass tufts, and the return of the swarms of pestering flies that the cool weather had providentially banished, were the first symptoms of the changing season.

But with the warmer days of summer there rose in young Jacky a spirit of rebellion that he should have to continue to wear the one-piece overalls that he had been glad to don in the cooler weather. He wanted to be free, to run naked and unhampered like the blacks. Fettered with these things, he felt

himself unfairly handicapped; the youths he used to outdistance now turned the tables on him, to his supreme disgust, and no longer could he end a hectic game by joining in the concerted headlong rush to the river and a plunge into the cool water. While the others went on unimpeded he had to pull up on the bank and lose precious moments getting out of his overalls. It was not fair, cramping a boy's style like that.

Mark did not seem to feel the burden of clothes—sketchy as they were. He had less time to spend at the camp nowadays as a certain amount of work had fallen to him. He was still too small to use the big axe, but he could swing his long-shafted tomahawk to some purpose and, except for the big backlogs which the gipsy cut, Mark was responsible for the maintenance of the wood-heap in front of the hut door. He it was who rounded up the milkers every evening and penned up the calves. He learned to milk and joined his mother every morning sitting on a stump and leaning his forehead against the warm black flank of the cow and making the milk spurt musically into the wooden coolamon. Mark took charge of the increasing flock of sheep, the descendants of sheep lifted by the gipsy on his night raids. They were originally intended to figure on the menu when game was scarce, but the gipsy's dislike of killing female animals that could be relied on to propagate their kind, saved their lives, and Mark came to look on the erstwhile pet lambs as his own particular property.

Toward the human elements that comprised his world he was still as outwardly undemonstrative of affection as ever. He went on his stolidly quiet way, expecting nothing and rarely being disap-

pointed in that, and when exceptions to the rule did occur he accepted them without emotion of any sort. But since he came to regard the sheep as his own particular property, a sort of jealousy, unobtrusive yet simmering hotly under the surface, became apparent when any one interfered with his charges. In the daytime when they grazed their way down to the stream and up toward the hills, he kept a watchful eye on them. Armed with a polished hardwood waddy he defended his flock from the pranks of the boys from the camp, usually led by his mischievous young brother, and even joined in battle against raiding dingoes with a fearless disregard for his own safety that drew the covert admiration of the gipsy.

John Sim watched the boy and this growing trait with mild curiosity. It was more than a sense of mere acquisitiveness. When a sheep had to be killed for food, Mark became moody and reluctant; on occasions, when a particular favourite was selected for the menu, the boy would argue for its reprieve, putting forward the suitability of another. Once, when food scarcity threatened to reduce his flock considerably, he marshalled all the boys of the camp and led them forth to comb the neighbourhood for game of any sort to keep his charges out of the pot.

And all the while, profiting by the protection that a Governor's whim had afforded his cattle, the gipsy made long exploring trips through the wild hilly country to the south-west. The farther he went beyond the barren belt of dense scrub, the better country he found, but the immediate problem of shifting the herd appeared less difficult in his estimation than that of keeping them on the new country when he got them there. His sons were

still too young to be of much assistance, although Mark was coming on. But he knew it would be a long time before the cattle banished the memory of the succulent Cowpastures from their bovine minds and they could be relied on to attempt to return on every possible occasion. So he went on searching for a suitable haven against the day when they would be forced to move.

Settlers were pushing out farther and farther from Parramatta, and Brady's farm which was once an outpost was now a centre of cultivation. Then there came a halt with the discovery of a river away to the north. It was named the Hunter River after the Governor, and a settlement they called Newcastle because of its rich coal deposits had sprung into existence at its mouth. Tales of the fertile country fringing the banks of the river drew every settler north, and the gipsy breathed more freely for a time.

But memories of the wild cattle and the verdant Cowpastures still dwelt tantalizingly in many minds. All sorts of projects for their capture were clandestinely discussed. Even Samuel Marsden, the stocky downright parson of Parramatta, had ideas on the subject. His plan was to drive quiet dairy cattle out among the wild herd to act as a steadying influence so that they could be surrounded and driven in to civilization. Even the Governor had a book sent to him from England describing a system of catching wild cattle in vogue in America, entailing the skilled use of a rope known as a lasso.

Captain Hunter was finding his position as Governor no sinecure. Under his predecessor, Major Grose, the control of the colony had been usurped by the military officers and Governor Hunter soon

realized that he would find himself practically alone in any attempts at reform. England was eight months' sail away, so the position grew steadily worse. Rum was the main currency of the colony, and the officers of the New South Wales Corps had gradually appropriated the monopoly of handling all the rum imported. They regarded it as a perfectly natural perquisite and a profit of five hundred per cent was quite reasonable in their eyes. So it was quite natural that the regimental designation of the garrison failed to withstand the load; in the minds and mouths of the people it became the Rum Corps, and the apt new title went down to history.

It was, of course, far below the dignity of any officer to retail the spirits in person since his customers were mainly the lags, emancipists, and soldiers whom he was expected to discipline. But there was nothing to prevent an officer setting up a grog shop, picking a good-looking wench from the latest batch of female convicts and putting her in charge. It was highly profitable for both parties; no names were mentioned or advertised. And although the officer called frequently and spent most of his nights there . . . well, it was infinitely better to be Mistress Public House with a fine gown to wear than toiling and sweltering in the brothel atmosphere of old Flog-'em Marsden's factory at Parramatta.

However, these happenings did not affect the gipsy nor the state of his prospering herd. The seasons rolled on, alternating their smiling bounty with long spells of dry hot weather that burned up the grass and dried the ponds. Streams stopped running and became mere chains of muddy pools daily decreasing in size and number. Sometimes a

carelessly tended fire would get out of control, lick through the dry grass, and in no time a raging, roaring wall of flame would sweep the parched country, soaring high up into the tree-tops and destroying haystacks, huts and everything in its path.

Then while the settlers still raked dolefully for a trace of their household goods in the blackened wake, the heavens would darken and down would come the rain with a force that these sons of a country where rain was an almost daily occurrence, had never visualized. The streams would rise, the rivers would come down in a sudden raging flood, bursting their banks and sweeping away anything that the bush-fire had left. It was a country of extremes and it never left a man to rest in comfort for long. He had to be wary, alert and prepared even in the best of seasons for a quick change of face from Dame Nature.

There was now increasing evidence of a more ethical activity than the rum traffic among the officials of the colony and it afforded Brady, hoeing his patch of corn and potatoes, unlimited amusement. He sat on a fallen log beside the gipsy one evening, alternating his curses on the drought with chuckles at the ambitions of the new landed gentry. The gipsy's horse cropped the short dry grass of the little clearing and in the distance through the trees rose the thin smoke of the hearths of Parra-matta.

"Man," said Brady, "it wud make ye laugh, the antics av 'em. They tuk their grants av a hunderd acres because it was something for nothing, an' they were more concerned wid the view than whe-

ther it wud grow a feed o' praties. Annyway, they soon got sick o' farrming, an' little wonder; what wid plantin' oats when they shud ha' bin harvestin', an' the bandicoots an' thim infernal grasshoppers eatin' everythin' faster'n it grew, they left their land or sold it for a keg o' rum. But wan or two had the sinse to kape on thryin'. There's Macarthur, bad cess to him; he started off collectin' sheep an' now he can talk o' nothin' else but. Wan av thim days he'll be givin' up sojerin' an' settlin' down wid his ideas."

Brady chuckled hugely at the prospect and went into details: "Ye've seen his sheep? Coorse ye have—haven't I helped ye ate 'em! Thim hairy, lop-eared, slab-sided annymiles, more like goats to me an' av all the colours—blacks, whites, greys, brindles an' piebalds. Well, Macarthur's bin keepin' a close eye on 'em an' 'e sez 'e's goin' to grow wool. Wool! But wait a minnit! When I was down in Sydney, in sails Cap'n Wather'ouse from the Cape av Good Hope, loaded up wid black cattle, some foine mares"—the gipsy's eyes lit with interest—"an' over a score av a new sort of sheep: merinos, they calls 'em."

Brady shifted round on the log to face the gipsy in the gathering dusk.

"If ye had seen the commotion an' the ruunin' about afther thim sheep! In comes Macarthur at the gallop wid Parson Marsden at his coat-tails. Laycock, Williamson, Rowley, Moore, to say nothin' av Cap'n Kent, an' Wather'ouse, all bargainin' for the new sheep. Macarthur wants to buy the lot an' offers a hell av a price. But the Governor says No, let every man have a share. It seems that thim merino sheep come from Spain an' grow the finest

wool in the wurrl. Annyway, Macarthur got fower yowes and two rams wid big curly horns, an' they say he's that mad wid excoitement since he brung 'em to Elizabeth Farrm that 'e eats an' sleeps wid 'em. Ye'll have yer work cut out to lift wan av thim." Brady slapped his thigh and chuckled thickly at the idea.

Riding homeward in the early hours of the morning with a couple of lambs—not Macarthur's—slung in the sack in front of him, the gipsy turned over in his mind the news that Brady had gathered and its probable repercussions. He was well aware of the covetous eyes fixed on the Cowpastures and a change of government might bring a concerted rush of land-hungry officials to his land. Of them all, he feared Macarthur most. Where his desires led, Macarthur was rash and unscrupulous, and his present holdings were fully taxed by his ever-growing flocks. This project of improving the wool of his flocks by crossing with his new merino rams had little interest in itself for the gipsy, but he knew that the plan meant expansion and that Macarthur would redouble his efforts to reach the forbidden Cowpastures.

The colony was showing definite signs of prosperity on every side. The labour shortage had been overcome by the system of assigning convicts to settlers. The plan suited every one—except perhaps the convicts themselves, and no one ever worried about the feelings of a transported criminal. The Government was thus solving the worrying problem of how to house and employ the ever-increasing shiploads of wretched humanity from the overflowing prisons and hulks of England and the landowner found himself with unlimited free labour to hoe his

fields, tend his flocks and clear his land for further expansion. Truly a splendid scheme!

Within sight of the hut, the gipsy drew rein and stared with frowning brow at a column of smoke rising a bare half-league away. It was clear to his experienced eyes that it was not a native's fire. They made only a small fire with dry wood, giving off a mere pencil of smoke. This was almost in the nature of a bonfire with a fat, reckless column of smoke rising to the blue, spelling danger if not disaster. He clapped his heels into the horse's ribs and rode hard for the hut.

Ann and the boys were waiting anxiously on the edge of the trees. They had seen the smoke but were equally ignorant of its origin. The gipsy slipped off his horse, hastily ordered them indoors to await his return, and hurried back, musket in hand, to investigate.

Taking advantage of every fold in the open rolling land and spying ahead from the shelter of every tree, he gained a slight eminence within a hundred paces of the smoke and what he saw before him roused a red, murderous gleam in his eyes and bared his teeth with rage. On the leaping flames of the fire, a calf was roasting whole. The smell of burning hair and flesh borne to his nostrils made them twitch and tightened the fingers on the musket at his side. Beyond the fire lay the carcass of a cow and round the flames squatted four runaway convicts, ragged, bare of foot and head, with long, unkempt hair and beards. A cow *and* a calf! The gipsy could hardly restrain his feelings at the useless prodigality of the slaughter. The runaways were doubtless starving, but why could they not be content with killing one animal? The calf alone

would have supplied more than ample meat for their present need, yet they must squander one of his best young cows. From it they had merely hacked off a few steaks and were voraciously wolfing the half-cooked meat while they waited expectantly for the roast veal.

The gipsy turned like a flash at a faint sound close behind him, throwing up the muzzle of his gun to meet attack, then he lowered it slowly as the dark features of Bunde-bunda rose from the grass. The native slid noiselessly to his side, dragging a bundle of long red spears. He noted the gipsy's grim features with satisfaction; this time they were both of the same mind regarding the invaders. The white man glanced quickly round the landscape and his eyes asked a question. The native nodded comprehension and a dark forefinger indicated a dozen points around the unconscious feasters where unseen warriors in a narrowing circle watched every movement of the marauders.

Bunde-bunda, turning slightly on his side, selected a long spear and fitted the haft into the nick of his wommera, then glanced back with the lust of killing in his eyes. To his surprise the white man laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Which way they come?" he demanded.

The black sullenly gestured toward the north.

"Tell your men we will drive them back. If they will not go, or if they return . . ." His grim eyes were significant.

The native lowered his spear and drew apart as the gipsy pushed his musket forward and took careful aim at the fire.

There was a shattering report, and the impact of the ball scattered the burning coals into the faces

of the startled convicts. They sprang to their feet, dropping the meat they were eating. One man seized a musket from the ground and threw a hasty glance at the puff of smoke that advertised where the shot had come from. The others ran aimlessly hither and thither; then, as they recovered from the shock, they sneaked back to pick up their discarded clubs and gravitated together, debating their next move with frightened oaths. They were convinced that the soldiers were on them till a spear whistled past them, followed by another, then another, and their fear increased to panic. The man with the musket started to retreat with hasty glances to right and left. The others jostled close on his heels; but one, a miserable, weedy specimen, dashed back and dragged the charred carcass of the calf from the fire, hopping and cursing as he knocked off the coals with his bare hands. A spear whistled past his ear, transfixed the carcass and stuck quivering; the starving lad leaped into the air with a despairing howl, dropped his burden and legged it after his fleeing mates.

Next morning at daylight, John Sim mounted the bay horse and rode off, silent, grim and purposeful. He was going to try again, a shade farther west of his previous journeys, and this time something definite must be decided. The Cowpastures were no longer healthy for him or his family or his herd. He knew only too well the calibre of the recent marauders. The soldiers might drive away his cattle, but he trusted to his cunning and superior bushcraft to recover them eventually from them. But those outlaws ranging the bush were fugitives like himself, though of a different type. He took what he wanted, but he jibbed at taking human life.

Those skulking outcasts had lost any conception of right and wrong they had ever possessed; they would kill a man or a woman with no more qualms than they would tread on an ant—because it happened to be in their path—and think no more of it. He knew the records of their raids, outrages and murders on the scattered settlers on the Hawkesbury too well to expect them to consider either his cattle or his kindred, should they discover his abode.

On the third day out, traversing a country of dark, rugged hills covered with dense forest, he fired at a small grey kangaroo to replenish his larder. The animal fell wounded, then recovering, hopped desperately away through the timber. The gipsy followed as fast as the thick undergrowth would permit, gaining on the animal till suddenly it disappeared almost before his eyes. He hurried forward, brushing the thick bushes roughly aside, then came to a sudden halt, swaying on the very edge of a precipice.

His fingers clutched at the bushes and he dragged himself back, gasping at his narrow escape. The rock wall fell sheer for a hundred feet—but where had the kangaroo gone? Then, to his amazement, he sighted it far below, still hopping jerkily along with ebbing strength. How on earth had it got down there? Then the solution dawned slowly on him, expanding and taking hold of him with the magnitude of what it might mean to him, and the wounded kangaroo was completely forgotten.

He was looking down on a great rock-walled valley, on a green, roof-top of trees interspersed with clearings carpeted with deep, luxuriant grass, and down among the timber the sunlight glinted on a running stream. He stared, scarcely daring to

breathe, his eager eyes scanning the rocky confines disappearing into the blue distance. He dared not let himself think of the possibilities of his discovery. If only . . . yes, that was the trouble. There were too many "ifs" attached to it so far. First of all he had to find a way down; if a wounded kangaroo could get down, so could John Sim. Carefully he skirted back along the edge of the precipice until he came on a well-worn game-pad that led to a narrow ledge winding down to a buttress of rock behind which it disappeared. The man scrambled carefully to the corner and found a wide ledge running along under the overhanging cliff. Thence it dropped in a narrow, winding descent, so steep and broken at times that he had to lower himself bit by bit, clinging tenaciously to the tough-stemmed bushes growing out of the crevices of the rocks.

He drew a long, deep breath at the bottom of the path and looked eagerly around. The valley here was about a mile across. To the left it narrowed and the timber grew thick and filled that corner, but down to the right it widened in the sunshine between its rugged brown rocky walls, stretching away and away till it merged with the soft blue haze in the distance. He walked down through the scattered trees to the edge of the broad, shallow stream purling along, brown water over a stony bed that would have whispered "Trout" to his gipsy mind in another land.

All the rest of that day he explored the valley and the farther he went the more he thrilled at its possibilities. First of all, he followed the course of the stream from the eastern end where it tumbled down over the cliff into the valley in a slender, wind-blown waterfall, through its gentle meander-

ings between dark, overhanging thickets and across open, smiling meadows of tall grass. Game there was in abundance and so tame and unconcerned at his presence that he was convinced that not even the natives penetrated to the valley. Kangaroos stood erect on hind legs and thick tail and looked curiously at him before hopping undecidedly a few paces to turn and look again at this strange new being. Emus flounced in scores before his approach, to turn and stalk back again, investigating him with long, outstretched necks till he could have knocked them over with a stick. There were fat brown pigeons in the trees, and parrots winged their way across the glades to alight with a sudden flourish and burst of chattering in the branches. And nowhere along the banks was there sign of fires or huts or occupation of any sort.

Away down at the wide western end the sheer rock face was broken by a narrow cleft between whose walls the stream slipped out dark and silent. Satisfied that that most natural point of egress was impassable, the gipsy commenced to follow the frowning walls back, examining every indentation and canyon in the expectation of finding an outlet. The northern wall proved impregnable; not even a game-track scarred the frowning heights until he reached the precarious path by which he had entered. Then as darkness was falling he abandoned the search and scrambled up the path to where he had left his horse and camped for the night. In spite of fatigue, it was long before he dropped to sleep. The elation that possessed him picked up his restless thoughts and wafted them in a flight of fancy from peak to peak of his soaring dreams. If only the other side of the valley were

enclosed! If only he could find a track wide enough to bring the cattle in! If . . . if . . . The tremendous possibilities and probabilities hanging to those "ifs" made him restless till he got up and walked back and forward beside the leaping flames of the fire, and the skulking dingoes retreated into the dark scrub to rejoin the howling pack that made night hideous.

In the morning he waited impatiently for the eastern sky to pale the silver stars so that he could descend into the dark depths of the valley again and get on with the quest. Half-way round the wall, he found what he was looking for. A deep canyon pierced the wall and opened out again in a gradually ascending incline. Here were the pads of countless animals converging to the bush-screened lip that gave access to the outer world. The occasional steep pinches of the ascent could be overcome, and with care the cattle could be brought down here. It would only be necessary to erect a barrier at this point and nothing could enter or leave the valley. Here, he and his herd would be safe from detection and interference for many years to come—and he was still within striking distance of the settlement. So after a final inspection of his hidden valley, John Sim turned for home with a lighter heart than he had known for years.

CHAPTER VII

ON the inner edge of the clearing the gipsy halted his weary horse and peered suspiciously toward the hut, the jubilation fading from his eyes before the growing feeling that something was amiss. The hut stood silent. No smoke rose from the chimney and the heavy door was tightly closed. He remembered now that he had noted neither smoke nor sound from the blacks' camp down by the river, and his fears increased. He commenced to circle the clearing, eyes and ears alert; he reined his horse sharply and his heart froze at sight of a huddled form on the ground behind the hut. He urged the horse quickly toward it, an awful foreboding possessing him as a cloud of flies swarmed up with an angry buzz. Then he breathed more freely as he saw it was not what he dreaded to find but a sheep, stone dead, with belly already distended. He turned with quick relief as the door of the hut opened cautiously an inch at a time. A piebald, lop-eared lamb escaped through the narrow opening and cantered, stiff-legged, to the nearest patch of grass, nipping greedily at the short green blades. The corrugations deepened on the gipsy's brow and he slipped quickly to the ground with his musket ready.

Ann appeared in the doorway with relief flooding her anxious eyes. Her features were tired and drawn and she turned sharply on the two boys trying to slip past her after the little avalanche of lambs.

"What's wrong?" the gipsy demanded sharply, leaving the bay standing over the dragging reins.

"Trouble enough!" She stood aside to let him enter. "Some runaways killed a cow yesterday. Eight or nine of 'em there were. Then they went down to the blacks' camp and started to carry off some of the gins. Old Wattewal tried to stop 'em. They killed him. The rest ran away. One young gin—Warrawee it was—ran this way wi' two lags chasing her. I got the boys an' some o' the sheep inside in time. When they saw they couldn't catch 'er, one of 'em throws up his musket an' shot 'er dead just over there."

"They found the hut?"

She nodded grimly.

"I called on 'em to go back but they came on an' battered at the door. One of 'em I knew—that flat-faced O'Malley, the Irish cut-throat—so knowin' what to expect from him, I let 'im have a charge of shot. That brought the rest of 'em, and though I managed to hold 'em off, they killed a lot of the sheep afore they left."

The gipsy's face darkened with rage.

"Which way did they go?" he demanded thickly.

"You're too late!" The woman slipped slowly to a seat. Now that the strain was over and the responsibility lifted from her shoulders, reaction swept over her in an engulfing wave; her trembling knees refused to support her any longer. "The blacks came back to the camp last night. There was a big corroboree, all night, and this morning the men went out, all daubed with red. You know what that means!"

The man nodded slowly. White clay and feathers for dancing and ceremonial corroborees. Red for war.

The peace that he had established with the tribe

was broken. From now on, all white men would be regarded as their natural enemies, and even the authority that he had gained over the tribe could hardly survive. It would mean war—endless war. Whites going down before unseen spears. Blacks decimated by avenging whites with superior weapons and the inability to distinguish one tribe from another, or innocents from wrong-doers. The seeds of hatred had been sown: the harvest was inevitable. But the thought of all that must follow saddened the outcast who had renounced allegiance to his own race and still was not a black. He foresaw the misunderstandings, the useless, ruthless slaughter that must result, the remnants of the black tribes retreating farther and farther into the rugged hills, their well-grassed hunting-grounds annexed by the conquering white men.

It was their misfortune that, as nomads, they could show no villages, not even a substantial dwelling, no tended patches of cultivation to prove to the invader their hereditary right to their camps and hunting-grounds. They owned neither flocks nor herds, and although each tribe claimed the kangaroos, the emus, the possums and even the wild ducks alighting on the ponds within their tribal boundaries as their own, their claims would never be understood or credited by the land-hungry whites. It was only a matter of time before the wandering tribes would be dispossessed of the pick of their land, and their rights and claims swept brusquely aside like their flimsy bark gunyahs before a westerly gale. John Sim turned abruptly toward the woman.

"Pack up! Everything. We're going to move—now!"

She threw him a glance of quick inquiry.

"You've found a place?"

The shaggy head nodded, and as he went on to describe the hidden valley, his eyes brightened again. The woman caught his enthusiasm. She was eager now to leave the hut; the affairs of the past twenty-four hours had darkened it in her memory. The light flowed into her grey eyes again and the blood began to circulate strongly through her limbs.

"We won't tell the boys where we're going, nor the blacks neither. They'll track us. But it's beyond their country."

Ann took a long, steady survey of the walls that had seen her joys and sufferings. She knew every niche, every crack and splinter of them; she had lain awake at night watching the weird contorted shadows up in the peak of the roof while the rain drummed outside and big drops sizzled and hissed on the banked fire. The nights were full of noises, particularly the nights when she was alone in the hut. The thump and scratching of a possum on the roof, the childlike wailing of a tree bear, a dingo sniffing at the cracks; even the heart-chilling slither of a snake across the floor had brought her suddenly awake; but the sight of the familiar walls had always reassured her. She turned hesitatingly to the gipsy.

"The hut? . . . Will we leave it?"

He shook his head decidedly.

"We'll burn it. There must be no trace."

Above the broad, deep sweep of the stream where the stately she-oaks leaned their long, thin needles over the dark pool, the new hut was built. Behind

it, as far as the high walls that shut in the Valley, stretched a smooth expanse of green sward dotted with an occasional tree. The hut was a more pretentious building than the old abode at the Cow-pastures. The walls were built of wide vertical slabs of cedar with a high-pitched bark roof that flattened out and projected on the two sides that caught the brunt of the sun, to form shady verandas. The big mud-plastered stone chimney rose from the side of the main room opposite the doorway, and the walls boasted square holes—neither windows nor yet loopholes but something of each—for light and ventilation. Ann claimed the small room on one end of the building while John Sim shared the bigger room on the other side with the boys and a heterogeneous collection of stores, arms and equipment. In time, this room became the store-room to the exclusion of all other claims, and the northern veranda with its three crude stretcher beds was the actual sleeping-place of the men. A rough-hewn cedar table occupied the centre of the living-room.

The dim, warm atmosphere of the main room was sleepily quiet. The flies kept up a continuous buzzing and only a fitful flicker came from the butt of the log almost buried in the deep mound of white ash that filled the fireplace. Sun and rain had toned the exterior of the hut to a neutral tint that blended it softly into its surroundings, and on the shady southern side a mossy coat had begun to assert itself on the slabs.

Ann had long since lost count of the months and the years. Time had ceased to be measured thus and dates were meaningless things that conveyed nothing. Life was roughly divided into two epochs

—the old hut and the Valley—and time was regulated by events. There was the year of the flood, for instance, and the time when Governor Hunter came to the Cowpastures; the year Jack was born, the momentous exodus to their present refuge in the Valley, and the time of the big drought when the stream stopped running into the Valley and the creek became a chain of ponds. These were some of the major events and the minor happenings were tabulated according to their proximity to them.

Ann had more time to think nowadays that the boys were growing up, and often the turn of her thoughts was so troubling that she would rise abruptly from her favourite seat on the shady veranda overlooking the mirrored pool, with the dark dots of the cattle standing lazily under the distant trees, and cross deliberately to the potato patch, hoe in hand, to work herself out of her gloomy fancies.

It had always been a hard, lonely life. Since she escaped from the settlement nearly twenty years ago she had not set eyes on a white woman. Back at the Cowpastures the black gins had been company of a sort. She did not know their tongue, and they were a shameless, smellful lot without a stitch of clothing among them; but their cheerful, giggling presence had meant something to her. The years in the Valley had been a closed, hermit-like existence. The blacks gave the place a wide berth; to them it was haunted—a place of *debbil-debbils*, evil spirits. Only once had she left the craggy confines, when John and the boys and herself had ridden over to the coast for salt, their scarcest, most precious commodity. It had been a long, hazardous ride through dense forest and undergrowth, their horses

sliding down the steep mountain sides and scrambling up rough, bouldered slopes where she had to cling to the mane to keep herself from slipping back over its tail.

Nowadays she had no longer any desire to go abroad. She tired too easily, and the fire in her blood that had urged her on and carried her along seemed to have gone out altogether. She was thinner and more angular than ever, despite the safer, more ordered life, and her faded yellow hair was going grey. John had not changed much. Although he must be approaching fifty he was as hale and tough as ever. A few grey hairs sprinkled his shaggy black head and beard, but his broad shoulders rippled and swung as smoothly and rhythmically as in the old days.

But it was round the boys that Ann's life and thoughts centred, and as the long hot days displaced the short nippy winter, and again gave way in their turn, each bringing a change in the fast growing youths, her life seemed no longer empty and purposeless. They were her achievement, and she lived through them.

It had been hard for them at first in the Valley. Mark had settled down after a bit, but Jacky mourned and fretted for his laughter-loving black playmates. He was too young to find distraction in the routine jobs, and anyhow, he hated the thought of *having* to do anything. If the job could be left until he felt in the mood to tackle it, he could do it in half the time it would take Mark; otherwise he was a rebel and the gipsy's sharp admonitions and the occasional weighty cuff that followed only reduced the boy to sulking.

There had been work enough after their arrival

in the Valley to keep them all occupied for months. There was the hut and a stout, high stockyard to be built; and eventually Ann had got her way and a patch of fertile ground had been cultivated and close-fenced to keep out the kangaroos and bandicoots. Now they grew their own corn and potatoes and a few other vegetables. The gipsy had an inherent dislike of any sort of agriculture. He fenced the patch for her, but it was she and Mark who broke up the rich black loamy soil with their hoes and kept down the smothering weeds. Jacky took after his father in that respect and, in addition, he had imbibed much of the blackfellow's outlook toward manual labour. He was quite content to sit idly plaiting a whip or a rope out of cowhide, or even doing nothing at all, and watch the bent back of his mother in the cultivation while the short, heavy stroke of her hoe roused no uneasy feelings in his conscience.

He still played the native games with Mark when he could persuade the latter. Jacky always won. He had developed an eye as quick as the blacks'. He not only beat them at their games but added a few variations of his own that they tried in vain to emulate. He would squat on his heels, blackfellow fashion, facing Mark at a distance of fifteen feet, and the elder brother would hurl sticks or cakes of dried cowdung at him. Jacky, holding a short stick by the middle, vertically in front of him, would deflect every missile with a slight parry of the stick, no matter how much Mark feinted or varied his speed or choice of projectiles.

Then they would play the spear game, Mark with a supply of slender, blunted spears facing the grinning Jacky armed only with a narrow wooden shield.

The spears whistled past his ducking head; he would jerk his hip aside to let a red shaft pass, then he would crouch in a smaller target, deflecting the spears with the slightest movement of the shield till a favourable moment arrived: then his brown hand would shoot up, catch a spear as it whistled past, and he would rise with a wild yell to launch it unerringly back at the thrower. Even the natives themselves could not bring off that last trick. It was his own, and he was justly proud of it.

Jacky's interests in the Valley were confined to the cattle and the horses—particularly the horses. Mark's flock of sheep he despised; in his opinion, they were silly, doddering creatures, unable to defend themselves against the marauding dingoes that scattered them in headlong panic before slaughtering the helpless animals right and left. Jacky's antipathy may have had its source in his dislike of being routed out of bed in the middle of the night when the barking of Mark's dog gave warning of an attack on the sheep-fold.

Cattle were different. They could look after themselves: after they had beaten off one or two attacks, it was only a large and hunger-driven pack of dingoes that would face the black, slashing horns of the cattle. Since their arrival in the Valley, the cattle had roamed at will with only the natural barriers of the rock walls as their limits, and they were no longer the quiet domesticated animals that their ancestors had been. Freedom had developed in them a will of their own and a surprising turn of speed when any attempt was made to coerce them. Twice a year the protesting herd was mustered into the stout stockyard and the natural increase dealt with by the gipsy and his sons. Jacky

loved these musters above all things. His was the self-appointed task of galloping after the break-aways, his diminutive figure mounted on a big bay horse with only a sheep-skin under him for saddle, dashing and dodging through the timber with stock-whip swinging and cracking sharply on the foiled beasts, galloping them back into the herd with a whoop of triumph. That, to Jacky, represented the highlight of enjoyment—life at its best.

Father and sons would perch on a rail, high above the broad, black backs milling beneath, and the elation and pride of ownership that emanated from the gipsy was early absorbed by the boys. He would pick the best of the bull calves to be retained for service in the herd, and thus he educated his sons—not in the intricacies of reading and writing of which he himself was ignorant, but in the points that went to make or mar a beast, the lore of the cattleman and of the gipsy reivers.

At the end of the muster, when the gate was thrown open and the calves streamed forth, was enacted the culminating point of Jacky's enjoyment. He would hang poised above the gate, then drop on the back of a big calf. With a bellow of outraged surprise the animal would career across the big yard, bucking and twisting to try to rid itself of the laughing incubus on its back. That was Jacky's *tour de force*. Time and again he was thrown and kicked, but it only seemed to whet his appetite for more excitement.

But above all, his love of swift, rapid movement found expression in horses. By dint of stolen nocturnal visits to the few stallions of the colony, the old mare and her female descendants were now represented by a thriving band of horses. At the

age of fifteen, Jacky had not only absorbed the horse-handling talents of his gipsy father, but showed promise of beating him at every aspect of the game before many more years should elapse. He handled the animals with a fearless assurance that commanded confidence, and he sat them at any pace, bare-back or with a sheep-skin under him, as though he were part of the animal.

The streak of cheerful indolence that seemed to have been born in him was nowhere evident where horses and cattle were concerned. And springing from his partiality for them was his hobby of plaiting—a restful, soothing occupation that could best be performed in the shade of a tree or on the cool side of the house. It commenced at an early age when the convict whip that he had commandeered on its first appearance among the family belongings began to show signs of dilapidation. The boy sat eager and squirming with impatience to follow the gipsy's nimble fingers plaiting a new thong over the old frayed one, passing the strands over and under in a sort of basket weave, watching the pattern grow under his eyes.

Since then, Jacky had made himself many whips, each one an improvement on its predecessor; and there was a noticeable lengthening and tapering of the thong, evolved from the practical experience of the maker and user. He still retained the short handle, but with the long supple thong it became, in his practised hands, an invaluable adjunct in the mustering of the unruly herd.

And so, from the hated symbol of the dark beginnings of the colony was evolved the stockwhip—the insignia of the Australian cattleman.

CHAPTER VIII

THE atmosphere in Brady's cabin was thick with curling smoke that could not find an outlet, and heavy with a multitude of odours through which the aromas of damp dog and stale clothing predominated. Mark squatted silently in the darkest corner. The leaping flames of the fire lit the smoky interior with a red luminous haze that absorbed the bulky shadows of Brady and the gipsy sitting at the hearth conversing in low tones. Mark knew they were talking about him and a deep unease possessed him at the moment. So many things had happened since he had accompanied the gipsy on the previous raid that his balance and self-confidence had evaporated, leaving a hollow, sinking feeling deep down within him in their place.

It had been Brady's idea. The added distance between the Valley and the settlement had cut down the frequency of the gipsy's periodic forays and now, with the expansion of his herd, a new and more legitimate avenue of commerce had offered itself. To fill in their days at the Valley, John Sim and the boys had commenced to train the younger steers to carry a pack and to work in harness. Draught animals were scarce and valuable in the colony and the idea had occurred to the gipsy thus to dispose of his surplus stock.

It was no desire to give up his freebooting ways for legitimate trade that had given birth to the notion. But the herd had increased to such an extent that the natural resources of the Valley were now taxed to the utmost to carry them. Last

winter, the rain had come just in time to save them from an exodus in search of grass. Wide stretches of bare, dusty ground bordered both banks of the stream where the grass had once grown lush and green. The kangaroos that had grazed peacefully in their hundreds had been killed for food or driven out to preserve the pasture, yet so great was the strain that every calf that was born increased the problem. In winter, the family killed their own bullocks and lived royally on better beef than the Governor himself could find, but John Sim realized that a decision regarding the future must soon be made.

Trading the non-productive oxen offered a respite if not a solution to the problem, but as the actual bargaining and sales could not be effected by the outlaw, a go-between was necessary, and who was better fitted to be his agent than Brady? At the first hint of the project, Brady's head jerked up and his eyes lit with instant enthusiasm. He could already visualize fat pickings for himself out of it.

"Man, but it's the foine idee! But we'll need to go aisy. A bullock here—another there—wherever they have the price an' don't ask too many quistions."

The gipsy nodded grim concurrence on that point.

"Thim new arrivals'll be the wans to take 'em—an' mebbe wan or two av the Hawkesbury settlers. But it's a long way to cart back the wheat they have to pay for 'em." Brady's eyes strayed in the direction of Mark and the lids drooped craftily as he toyed with the idea forming in his mind. "What about lettin' the bhoy there shtop wid me for a while?" he ventured.

Sim's black beard jutted warningly, but Brady's wheedling voice continued.

"I can't be lookin' after the farrm an' trapesin' about the counthry findin' who wants to buy oxen at the same toime, but if the bhoy was here to give an eye to the beasties . . ."

"Not on your life, Brady!"

Despite the sharp note of finality, Brady went on undeterred. "But look at the eddication he'll git, man . . . an' the sights av civilization!"

"Aye!" sneered the gipsy. "The triangle an' the cat . . . a lot of upstart sojers, rum swillers an' drunken trulls. He'll stay at home!"

Brady shook his head sadly. "The chance ye're missin'! Tachin' the bhoy to skulk in the woods when he moight be here learnin' the roads an' noticin' who's got a likely horse or a foine cow or a few sheep that are worth liftin'. He could get the lay o' the land from Sydney town to the Hawkesbury. The counthrysoide's all agog wid the new merino sheep Cap'n Macarthur brung out from England t'other day. They say their wool's worth a mint o' money."

He looked round with barely concealed surprise at Mark's quiet entry into the group. The boy's blue eyes probed his eagerly.

"What do they look like?"

"The sheep? Jist little fellers—only half the size av the owld breed, wid long necks an' no tails worth talkin' about; but the wool's all white an' soft like."

The boy turned slowly but with an air of decision to the gipsy.

"We'll take some back with us."

Brady broke into a roar of laughter and slapped his thigh. "Ye'll have to get up bright an' early to

git away wid Johnny Macarthur's sheep! Why, he puts a leather collar round their necks, an' the lag that shepherds 'em never lets 'em out av his sight, night nor day." He paused for a moment, thinking rapidly, then turned his wheedling smile on Mark. "How'd ye loike to have a look at 'em wan day?"

The boy nodded eagerly, then turned to the gipsy and looked him full in the face. Behind the new interest stirring in his eyes, their calm depths held a strength and confidence that was disconcerting. This new-born gleam of obstinacy was so unexpected, so foreign to the nature of the quiet, submissive boy that it reminded the gipsy with a jar that Mark, whom he had come to look upon as his own, was not his son. He turned roughly aside and left the hut without a glance at Brady.

Mark listened intently to the sound of the retreating footsteps and knew intuitively they would not return. He passed silently into the darkness in their wake, leaving Brady staring after him with a mixture of bewilderment and amusement.

What occurred between the man and the boy on that long homeward ride was a matter they kept entirely to themselves. But when the news was broken to Ann that her first-born would be leaving the Valley for a space, there were two to supply answers and reasons to counter her dogged refusal and weaken her obduracy. She pleaded his youth, never acknowledging that he had been doing a man's work. She defied the gipsy to take him. Ordered Mark sternly never to leave the Valley again, and all the time she knew she was beaten.

There was no show of emotion when they left. They might have been merely going to ride round the Valley as usual; but when she was alone on her

usual seat near the hut door, her eyes, undimmed by tears but fierce with suffering and anxiety, watched the two horsemen and the little bunch of cattle they were driving till the timber finally screened them from sight.

Their arrival with the cattle surprised and elated Brady. He had given up all hope of the fruition of his plan. He was as talkative and as effusive as the other pair were silent. When the gipsy rose to leave the hut on his lonely trip back to the Valley, he paused in the doorway for a silent nod of farewell to the boy. To Brady he said shortly: "I'll be back at the change of the moon." There was an underlying threat in his tone that cut short Brady's effusiveness; then he disappeared into the night.

At the age of sixteen, Mark was short in stature but strongly built, and totally unprepared for his new life with its new surroundings and strange people. The comings and goings of all these white men bewildered him. Their speech was foreign to his ear and it was some time before he got accustomed to the transported dialects of provincial England, to say nothing of Irish and Scotch that assaulted the ear at every turn. The gipsy's last injunction had been, "Keep your mouth shut and your ears open," and Mark, the least talkative of a non-communicative family, became a veritable clam.

Two days after his arrival, Brady came back from Parramatta in a highly elated state. Mark regarded him with uneasiness. The man was in a boisterous mood; he talked and laughed incessantly and slapped the boy frequently on the back. It was Mark's first introduction to the effects of rum, but the main thing was that Brady had found a market

for a pair of oxen and they were to take them for inspection the following morning.

They started off at daybreak, Mark driving the two black steers, while Brady, alternating between forced cheerfulness and fits of bad temper engendered by yesterday's rum dead within him, did his best to keep pace. It was a warm, sunny morning and the boy felt more at ease than since he left home. He liked the feel of the cool, powdered dust between his bare toes; the trees along the winding track were cheerful with birds, and away ahead he caught sight of a flock of sheep moving out to pasture with a ragged, yellow-coated convict plodding in the rear. His bush-bred senses were keenly alive to every movement, every wind-borne scent and every track on the dusty ground.

In the distance, the smokes of many fires proclaimed a big camp to his untutored mind, but he was quite unprepared for the sight of the town with its ordered rows of houses and huts that burst upon them as they topped a rise.

"Aye, that's Parramatta, son!" said Brady. "An' that big long building ye see is Parson Marsden's fact'ry. It don't belong to owld Flog-'em, mind ye, but he made 'em put it up for the wimmen. That's where all the rough uns go, an' Gawd knows, the best av thim they send out here is rough enough. Ye see, when a ship comes in, they line the wimmen up on deck an' the officers has their pick; the sojers come next, an' if a man wid a bit av land loike mesilf wants a wife, he can look over what's left. Or mebbe some av the settlers wants wimmen servants—an' they has *their* pick. But the wans nobody wants git sent to the fact'ry along wid thim that's bin in service an' is goin' to have brats."

Brady spat sententiously. "If they called it a brothel or a spawnin' fact'ry they wud be nearer the mark. We turn off here, son."

The two bullocks were finding the sights and sounds of civilization as strange and fear-inspiring as did their youthful driver, and the last part of the journey which entailed passing the outhouses and labour huts of a fair-sized farm was accomplished with difficulty. The owner, a stout, red-faced man with a hectoring manner, came out to meet them. He walked round the uneasy-eyed oxen, pursing his full lips and prodding the nervous beasts with a thick thumb or passing his hand over their hairy backs and ribs. Then he turned and surveyed Mark for a full minute. The boy, arrayed in a cut-down pair of Brady's old patched pants, his long tousled hair falling over his sun-bronzed features, fidgeted under the stare.

"Your boy, Brady?"

"No, yer Anner! Jist a neighbour's bhoy givin' a han' wid the bastes."

"Umph!" The protruding eyes switched back to a further inspection of the cattle and Mark, feeling thoroughly uncomfortable, did his utmost to keep out of their range. He was glad of the respite when Brady and the farmer disappeared into the house. While the bartering was in progress, Mark squatted in the shade of a tree with the oxen for two long hours. When the pair reappeared Brady wore a crestfallen look and the red-faced settler seemed more bumptious than ever. It was not until the cattle had changed hands and they were well on their homeward way driving a dozen sheep before them as part payment of the deal, that Brady recovered his usual form.

"We didn't do too bad, me son! There's thim yowes, an' a foine pig, an' some axes for yer Owld Man, to say nothin' av the wheat an' rum." His voice lost its apologetic tone and he licked his lips in anticipation of his commission—to be taken out in rum. "That owld sod's as tight skinned as a bull goin' uphill; but he don't ax no questions so we can't complain."

Mark paid little attention to him. The intricacies of finance held little interest for him as yet, and the actual process of the deal nothing at all. There were lots more cattle back in the Valley and at the moment all his care and attention were demanded in keeping the refractory sheep moving in the right direction.

"We moight ha' done a lot worse," Brady continued. "It isn't ivery man that makes a deal like Morgan over at Baulkham Hills did. He had a woife that wud give him no peace at all. So wan day he gits talkin' wid a settler up on the Hawkesbury that was lamentin' about livin' alone an' niver a wan to talk to. So before the day's out, Morgan sells his woife for six bushel av wheat an' a black pig. Not much av a pig either, but a foine bargain for all that." He broke off hurriedly and his mobile features took on a look of concern: "Lord save us, if it ain't owld Flog-'em himself comin'. Kape 'em movin', son, an' tell the prachin' owld busybody nothin' at all."

Mark glanced keenly at the thickset figure closing on them. What a preacher was he had no idea, but from the experienced way the newcomer ran his eye over the animals, the boy recognized a practical sheepman.

"Good day to ye, Misther Marsden."

"Well, Brady. A nice little lot of sheep you've got there. Are they for sale? And who's the boy with them? I don't remember seeing him before. Come here, boy!"

Mark hesitated between the necessity of keeping the sheep together and the ring of authority in the order.

"He's jist in from wan av the far-out settlers, yer Anner. Keep an eye on thim yowes, son!" Brady interposed quickly.

The Reverend Samuel Marsden peered at the sheep with one eye half-closed. "I have a roll of very nice cloth I could let you have, Brady," he suggested smoothly. "And one or two fine blankets. . . ."

"Blankets, yer Anner! An' who wants blankets in this climate? Why, a man cud slape nakid but for the bitin' an' singin' av the Miss Katies!"

"The wise man looks to the future, Brady, and winter will soon be on us. But what do you say to three bushels of wheat for that ewe in front?"

Brady threw up his hands in horror. "Three bushels . . . ah' her ready to dhrop two or three lambs at anny minnit. Why now, Cap'n Macarthur 'ud give me five bushels apiece for the lot."

"Not if I know him, Brady!" The farmer cleric forgot his caution at Brady's cunning mention of his rival. "He might put that crazy value on his own little merinos, but what is the use of wool to us? What we want here is mutton—something to fill empty bellies!"

Although he only caught scraps of the conversation, Mark immediately sensed that the fate of his sheep were in question and he gradually pushed his little flock ahead. From the moment he had taken

charge of them he had looked upon them as his own and he was fully determined to resist any attempt at removing them from his custody. The burly stranger looked more than a match for Brady alone, but if his attention could be engaged for a minute or so! . . . Mark balanced the hardwood stick he carried. There were times when his thoughts ran in channels that were purely aboriginal. But when next he looked back Brady was following alone, so Mark slackened pace.

"Bad cess to him! Show him a sheep an' he'll plague the loife out av ye till he gits it."

Mark threw him a dour questioning look over his shoulder.

"Is he going to take them?"

"Take 'em! Not if I can help it!" Brady avoided the disconcerting probe of the blue eyes. He felt distinctly uneasy underneath his bravado but tried to cover it with a flourish of words. "Owld Flog-'em's not so bad as they make 'im out to be. He sails down to Sydney an' howlds a service every Sunday mornin'. Soon as it's over he sets out to walk back to Parramatta to howld his service here in the afthernoon—fifteen moile, an' ivery wan longer than the wan before it. But it's not a parson he sh'uld ha' bin! He's got more av the makin's av a farrmer in him than anny twinty av thim dungaree settlers—mesilf an' all!" he concluded with a humorous shrug.

It was plain to see from the boy's dogged silence that he was still unconvinced. Brady looked a trifle helplessly at the square uncommunicative shoulders in front of him and decided that this was not the moment to break the news that the Reverend Samuel was coming to see him the next day on

matters unconnected with his religious calling; it would be time enough to cross his bridges when he came to them.

And so at noon the following day, a grimly despondent Mark stood watching his little flock run baa-ing to merge with a bigger flock than he had ever seen. There were close on three hundred sheep there, mostly blacks and greys and piebalds, but some were different from any he had ever seen before. Their fleeces did not hang loosely on them like the fat-tailed, black-faced sheep, but clung to them so that they looked like woolly balls on their white shanks; there was a ram too with wonderful spiral horns that went from one to another of the newcomers baa-ing throatily with his tongue flickering out and in.

Brady had won, and Mark had lost his sheep. He was filled with hot sullen resentment and at the same time more than ever bewildered by the way of the white men. He did not hate Brady so much as he despised him and he felt intuitively that the man was afraid of him. He disliked the stout, broad-shouldered Marsden too, but he did not despise him. Here was an enemy he would circumvent and enjoy doing it.

He glanced toward the farmer-parson as he stood over his flock, pointing out individual sheep to a stranger with a broad pale face and dressed in a square-cut suit of heavy grey cloth. Marsden shouted a command to the ragged convict on the opposite side of the flock and Mark watched the grimy-faced individual shamble his way through the scattering sheep in the direction of the curly-horned ram that was making amorous approaches to one of the new arrivals. The shepherd made a

clumsy dash, but the ram eluded him easily. Again he plunged toward the sheep, but they scurried away before him in a retreating wave and he wiped the perspiration from his brow with a ragged sleeve and threw a hunted look at his master.

"Coom oot o' that, mon, and bring 'em a' back!" The Reverend Samuel's reversion to broader Yorkshire indicated the stress of his feelings. His glance fell on the solitary figure of Mark. "Boy!" he commanded. "Catch that tup and bring him up to Mr Wood."

Mark came out of his dark reverie. He did not understand the words thrown at him, but he dimly comprehended the purport of the order. He moved slowly among the sheep and stood quite still while the perspiring shepherd limped around the far side driving them back. They came toward the boy, scarcely noticing his presence. His eyes were on the curly-horned ram surging through the sheep in his direction. Just as it passed, Mark moved easily and unhurriedly, slipping one hand under the animal's throat and the other round the off flank. The ram protested mildly but allowed itself to be guided through the ewes toward the two men. The pale-faced stranger turned to the parson.

"A handy boy that, Mr Marsden!"

The Reverend Samuel nodded without replying.

"Will you lend him to me?"

"He isn't mine, Mr Wood. But it might be managed. Stand in front of him, boy, and hold him by the horns."

Mark did as he was told and watched the parson's companion inspect the animal. First he ran his palms over the animal's back and sides, compressing a handful of wool here and there and nodding to

himself the while. Then, with his fingers he parted the fleece at intervals and the boy found himself peering at the short white wool disclosed. He had noted its softness when he caught it and, despite his injured feelings, he could not help feeling interested. The man walked round the sheep studying it from every angle; then he rejoined the parson.

"A nice animal, Mr Marsden, but a pity he's the only one."

"He's one of the first merino sheep to come into the colony, Mr Wood. Captain Waterhouse brought him, from the Cape of Good Hope—one of the twenty-six, and pure Spanish. Our friend Captain Macarthur was eager to purchase the lot—he offered fifteen guineas a head for them. Fortunately Captain Hunter, with all his faults, had a thought for others. How does he compare with Captain Macarthur's latest importations?"

Mr Wood hesitated, pursing his lips.

"He's a very old sheep now, but still I would say that in his prime he was as good as any I have seen. These first sheep, Mr Marsden, were of the old Escorial blood, the finest merino sheep in Spain. Those that Captain Macarthur has just brought out, and which I and my brother tended on the voyage, are of the Negretti strain. Fine sheep, mind ye, but I must admit that the English climate does not favour them. But this colony bids fair to rival Spain, judging by the way these sheep have improved since they arrived. It is astounding, Mr Marsden, and I regret that you and Captain Macarthur cannot agree."

The Reverend Samuel cleared his throat abruptly. "Mr Wood, you speak as a wool-classer. When you

have gained the experience in this colony that I possess you will realize that what we want is mutton. Wool does not fill empty stomachs."

"But consider how the flocks are increasing! I am told there are over twenty thousand sheep in the colony. In a few more years there will be more mutton and beef than can be consumed. Of what value will your flocks be then? This hair they grow may be good enough to make blankets for convicts, but nothing more. Some day, the people of this colony will send their own goods back to London in the empty ships, and what better could they send than wool."

"Then I will send my wool, Mr Wood!"

The wool-classer shook his head. "Your improved fleeces coming from this ram are most of them worth sending, Mr Marsden. But that"—he pointed sadly to a slab-sided, lop-eared, brindled ewe—"that is hair, not wool, and is not worth the money you would pay for its passage."

Marsden snorted derisively and turned away.

"Nonsense, man! You have been listening to Macarthur ranting all through those months at sea. Wait till you see all the flocks in the colony and hear the testimony of others. When do you start?"

"Within a few days." He nodded kindly to Mark still holding the ram by the horns. "You can let him go now!" Then, in an undertone he reminded Marsden: "What about that boy?"

The parson halted and beckoned to Brady loitering in the shade of a tree. He approached with alacrity. "Yes, yer Anner, if it's the wheat I moight as well lave it for a few days till I get me oxen back."

Marsden's eyebrows lifted.

"Your oxen! I didn't know you owned any, Brady."

"Sure, yer Anner, two av the foinest that iver turned their backs on a dray."

"Humph. I'll come over and see them one day, but it's about this boy of yours."

"Not mine, yer Anner," Brady interposed hastily.

"Well, can you spare him for a week or two? Mr Edward Wood has taken a fancy to him and the chance is one that should not be missed."

"But, yer Anner . . ."

The parson held up a large hand and went on. "Mr Wood is the first and only wool-sorter in the colony. He has just arrived from England, and His Excellency Captain Hunter has commissioned Mr Wood to visit all the flocks in the colony and to furnish a report on them. The boy will gain good experience and he will be well cared for. What do *you* say, boy?"

Mark looked fixedly at the parson for a moment. He had never met any one with such a commanding flow of language, and although he had not understood half of it he realized its intent. He glanced toward the wool-sorter with his square-toed shoes and his thick cloth suit that smelt faintly of sheep and wool, and he felt a vague friendliness emanating from the man. Then, without a look at the protesting Brady, he nodded acquiescence. Brady looked aghast.

"But whatever'll I tell yer feyther?"

"Tell him I'll be back!"

And Brady, open-mouthed, watched his old pants disappear as the boy sauntered leisurely toward a small enclosure where Parson Marsden kept his imported Suffolk bull.

CHAPTER IX

MARK's return to the Valley marked the beginning of an epoch and planted another milestone among the events by which Ann marked the passage of time. In outward appearance he was unchanged except that his long unkempt hair had been cropped short. The boy had also taken the precaution of getting rid of the stiff, ill-fitting clothes which the Reverend Samuel Marsden had presented to him. So to the critical eyes of his mother and the keen interrogation of young Jacky the only marks he showed of the unknown outer world were an increased vocabulary and a decided Yorkshire accent.

But the gipsy discovered in him at times a desire to talk, to discuss the ideas he had picked up, and a demand for explanation of the habits of mankind—and also of womankind—which John Sim found extremely difficult to answer. The boy's mental stature had been developed surprisingly in the weeks of absence: all the things he had silently noted and had turned over in his head in the meantime clamoured for explanation. Mark never at any time became loquacious. He thought out his problems for himself and only those that he felt required corroboration, or that seemed impossible of solution, ever saw light of day.

From a material point of view, Mark's sojourn in civilization had been of definite advantage to the family. The legitimate trade in oxen was yielding a surplus of goods that they did not know how to use. There were rolls of cloth and blankets, both of which the family had got along without for

nearly twenty years, and more wheat than they could grind.

For the present, no more oxen were going to Brady for disposal. There were still far too many cattle in the Valley, but the fact was that they had no use for most of the articles received in exchange, and the gipsy was averse to freighting goods back on pack animals that would leave a track to lead others to their hiding-place. A few copper coins were in circulation in the settlements, but for trade of all but a petty character, barter formed the basis of exchange, and the chief medium of barter was rum. Rum was of no use to John Sim.

But Mark's keen eyes had been used to advantage and the gipsy had acted promptly on his observations. In an enclosure near the hut roamed Parson Marsden's English bull—the pride of the colony. Mark had never forgiven the preacher for depriving him of his sheep. Farther down the Valley, a fine bay stallion arched his neck and circled the mares with flowing mane and tail and a snap of bared teeth for the laggards.

And Mark celebrated his new education by coming back to the Valley with a pair of the purest merino lambs—a ram and a ewe—that the colony boasted, slung from his saddle. He felt he owed it to his teacher as an appreciation of what he had learned—to pick the very best. The bull and the stallion were communal gains, but the sheep were for himself.

He had learned much from the strict but kindly Yorkshire wool-classer. In their tour they had examined practically all the sheep in the colony. These were largely the original Cape and Bengal breeds—big, lop-eared, flat-sided animals with huge

fat tails and covered with coarse hair. There had been various attempts at improving the breed by crossing these ewes with other types of sheep—coarse-woolled Irish rams, a squat Southdown, and the small curly-horned merino rams and their cross-bred progeny. The wool man discovered an eager pupil in the taciturn boy, and although the written report of his findings presented to Governor Hunter, in which he deplored that the colony's fine-woolled merinos were being sacrificed for the larger-framed sheep that grew only hair, would have conveyed nothing to Mark, the boy was the recipient of much fuller and more confidential information than that which reached the Governor.

Their tour ended at the Cowpastures, not far from the spot where Mark was born, for Captain Macarthur had at last succeeded in obtaining his long-desired grant of five thousand acres in the picked spot of the colony. Among Macarthur's sheep Wood waxed eloquent and gradually infected the boy with his love of fine wool.

Before they parted, Mark could look back with scorn at his elementary attempts at distinguishing wool from hair. The soft elastic feel of fine wool had made a lasting impression on him, and the ambitious projects of Macarthur plus the sound comments and advice of Wood had fired his dormant ambition. Ever since as a naked toddler he had put himself to bed against the warmth of a sheep's belly with his tiny brown fingers twined in its fleece and the strong sheep smell in his nostrils, the liking for sheep had been with him. Hitherto, he had built up his little flocks at the Cowpastures and in the Valley in haphazard fashion, but now he wanted to test his new theories.

The settlers with whom he had come in contact were already assessed and pigeon-holed in his mind. Marsden, he regarded as an energetic farmer but no wool man. The parson had squandered his good merino sheep, had let them run unchecked with the rough old breed till the slight resultant improvement was swamped by weight of numbers.

Macarthur was a different type. Mark had conceived an instant dislike for the domineering autocrat who dismounted from his fine horse and proceeded to browbeat Wood and deprecate his every statement. He never seemed to notice the presence of Mark or of the convict labourers unless to threaten them with punishment for some dereliction of duty.

But when Macarthur forgot himself in the pursuit of his hobby he was a different man. Behind his fiery, arrogant manner lay an absorbing interest in his sheep. It seemed to the watching, listening boy as though in the distant recesses of the man's mind hung the tantalizing image of a fleece, finer than any ever grown, and the man would know no peace until that ideal was attained. But in the attainment that other baser side of his character would brook no interference. The high ideal was housed in a remorseless Juggernaut that recked not the means so long as the end might be attained.

Mark saw with his own eyes what Macarthur had already achieved. He learned what Macarthur intended to do. The soldier-farmer had not squandered his merinos to little purpose as had most of the other recipients. The progeny of his merino ewes remained pure bred, and it was intended that that nucleus should always remain so. But interesting experiments were carried out in cross-breeding. The

progeny of the merino ram and the rough Cape sheep were mated again to the merino, and the result was a good animal retaining to a large extent the size of its mutton-growing female ancestors yet bearing a fleece that was distinctly wool and valuable as such. Each further resultant mating brought the progeny closer still to the merino type till some of the latest were almost identical.

But Macarthur had another belief which he stuck to in spite of the opposition he met on all sides from those who regarded this new country as nothing but an arid wilderness, and the time spent there as years filched from their lives. Each succeeding year convinced Macarthur that the fleeces of his sheep were improving as a direct result of their environment. The warm climate and the sparse grasses seemed to combine to exercise a benevolent influence on the wool; this knowledge and its consequences acted on the man's soaring ambition like an intoxicating stimulus. He would not be content to grow the finest wool in the colony. He intended to grow the finest wool in the world.

And the stocky, silent, efficient youth who caught and held his sheep for inspection without even attracting the great man's notice, though he knew little of the colony and less of the world, was just as firmly determined to surpass all that Macarthur meant to do. And so for a beginning he took two of Macarthur's best merino lambs.

The following summer was the hottest and driest the colony had ever known. Day after day the sun scorched the grass till it crunched and crumbled under foot and the hot swirling winds blew it away like powder. For days on end when the blistering wind blew from the west, the sky was obscured in

a ghostly pall and minute particles of red dust filtered down and covered every leaf and tree. The waterfall at the top of the Valley was reduced to a mere trickle that seeped dolefully down the mossy wall and the luxuriant ferns that grew there shrivelled and died.

By day, the cattle stood listlessly in the shade. At night they roamed restlessly the length of the Valley, and the gipsy lay awake listening to their muffled tramping and plaintive lowing. The situation had become desperate. Fleecy white clouds sailed tantalizingly across the sky, and in the hot evenings lightning flickered incessantly on the horizon, but hopes of saving rain continued to recede farther and farther.

At length, the gipsy decided the cattle would have to be shifted before it was too late. But first he left on a swift reconnoitring expedition toward the coast. He had to discover what conditions were like outside the Valley; where there was grass and water and how far settlers had pushed out. Jacky accompanied him and they were absent a week. When they came back their horses were exhausted and the furrows on the gipsy's brow were deeper than when he left, while his red-rimmed eyes betrayed the thoughts that tortured him.

Jacky showed little sign of fatigue, and he had found endless things to amuse him. They had encountered a big tribe of natives near the coast and with them a girl younger than himself and not black like the other gins. Her white mother had landed on the coast in company with white men. The natives had killed all but the woman, who had been appropriated by one of the tribe. Ann shivered at the thought of the woman's fate. She was

probably another convict escapee like Ann herself, but how different their fates. Anyhow, the woman was dead, and her half-caste daughter would never know the hells her mother had traversed.

They had also met an old man of the tribe that had lived with them at the Cowpastures, and he had recounted a tale of woe. Their hunting-grounds had been occupied by cattle and sheep and all the game driven off. The tribe was scattered to the winds. Many had been killed by the white men and the remnants had made their way south and west toward the Big River where they continually ran the risk of being killed by other tribes. The old man had heartened them with a prophecy of rain—big rain that would bring destruction on the whites that had slain his people and robbed them of their land. He had shaken a skinny menacing fist in the direction of the distant settlement and dragged himself painfully off toward the mountains.

But the gipsy refused to wait any longer. He had had ample reason to respect the black's forecasts, but the sight and sound of his starving cattle goaded him to action. Next morning they tore down the tangle of fallen trees with which they had barred the only passable entrance to the Valley. Ann put a few necessities together for the exodus and prepared a stock of provisions.

The sun went down on their preparations in an angry haze and left the night air hot and heavy. Sleep came fitfully to the gipsy, but Ann lay wide-eyed in the close atmosphere of her room, disturbed by the thought of leaving the home where she had hoped to end her days. The events that had happened there passed before her in cavalcade. The boys that had come there as children were growing

up. Mark was a man in stature if not in years. He would never be tall, but he was strong as a horse. Jacky was growing too; he was as tall as Mark, dark and lean and active when his natural indolence permitted.

A menacing boom of thunder interrupted her thoughts, but she brushed aside the hope that had been so often deferred.

Jacky, stretched naked on his bunk on the veranda, was startled to wakefulness by the thunder. A blinding flash lit up every drooping branch of the dusty casuarinas round the muddy waterhole, and was almost immediately followed by a rending crash. He lay tense and expectant, longing to voice his hopes to the others, for Jacky's boyhood with the aborigines had almost resulted in his becoming one of themselves, and their lore and superstitions were deeply rooted in him. He, of all the family, was firmly convinced of the infallibility of the old man's prophecy. Then a dull plop on the bark roof overhead brought him sitting up in bed. The searing flash of lightning that almost coincided with the thunder ripping the skies wide apart showed him Mark raised expectantly on his elbow, and the gipsy tense but never daring to move on his bunk lest he have to conceal his disappointment again. Another huge raindrop plopped on the roof, then another. They smacked on the hard ground, sizzled into the dust, increasing in number till the drumming on the roof and the thunderous roar of the storm drowned everything.

Jacky leaped from his bed and raced madly into the rain, whooping wildly as the big fat drops pinged and lashed his naked body. The hot dust underfoot was already turning to cool mud that

squirmed through the toes. The rain streamed from his hair down his face. He didn't worry about the incessant lightning that bathed the world or the thunder that shuddered and reverberated in one terrifying uninterrupted roll from wall to rocky wall of the Valley. He spun back breathless to the veranda and almost collided with the gipsy standing with arms outstretched and his bearded face lifted to the pelting rain in silent thanksgiving.

Mark, the practical, had gone to see to the safety of his sheep in the fold.

Morning brought no signs of cessation of the rain. It poured down all day. The creek that had been a chain of muddy waterholes was now a strong surging stream, and the waterfall roared and spouted a growing yellow torrent over the cliffs. Every little gutter in the Valley gurgled and chuckled as it sent its quota to join the main stream, and the bullfrogs that had long been silent croaked their hallelujahs on every side. The next day and for days to follow, the rain that had been so long in coming showed no signs of abating. Heavy sodden clouds shrouded the hill-tops, drifting across the Valley like grey veils, spilling their contents on the saturated ground and adding to the swollen streams.

They woke one morning to find the waters within a few yards of the door and the sight of the wide sheet of yellow water covering the lower part of the Valley brought them face to face with a new danger—flood. If the rain did not cease immediately and the water continued to pour into the Valley from every point of the compass, the entire floor of the depression would soon be a lake. It was almost that now.

They set out without a moment's delay to muster the cattle out of the wide lower end of the Valley where the greatest danger lay. The ground was a quagmire and every little gully a broad rushing stream. Most of the cattle were already in retreat from the rising waters and the musterers picked out the black dots all along the rising ground that sloped up toward the rock walls. They found the lower part of the wide sweeping basin completely submerged; trees stuck oddly out of the water and everything alive appeared to have retreated before it, so they started to drive the cattle round the edge of the wall toward the exit. All the horses were safe, but when they eventually turned the cattle up the incline toward the barrier, the gipsy reckoned that at least a third of the herd was cut off on the opposite side of the flood.

The water was still rising fast. Hastening back to the hut they found it completely surrounded and Ann working desperately, endeavouring to pile the stores out of reach of the flood. The gipsy's brusque orders galvanized the tiring boys to fresh action. The three riding-horses were hastily loaded with provisions and led by Ann and the two boys to the high ground at the exit. Ann was her old self again, keeping pace with her sons and battling determinedly through the water that was waist-high at times. She remained with the hastily unloaded pile while the boys raced the flagging horses back to the hut. On the return trip, Mark spied his sheep clustering on a knoll which the waters threatened to turn into an island. He left Jacky to go ahead with two laden horses while he swung off to rush his precious flock to safety. The water was level with the top of the kitchen table when they left for

the last time, and Jacky's last action was to drag a marooned snake from the rafters and sling it out into the yellow waters.

Towards morning, they crouched shivering over a fire waiting for the sun to rise, then they made their way to a vantage-point high above, where the summit of the cliff jutted outward. In the chill half-light of morning they looked down on the water stretching from wall to wall of the Valley in a sombre grey sea with only the tree-tops breaking the surface. Of the missing cattle there was no sign and the gipsy realized with a heavy heart that nature had solved the problem of overstocking in her immemorial fashion.

Mark accompanied the gipsy on his next trip to Brady's as soon as the floods subsided. They found that worthy bursting with news of the destruction the flood had caused.

"Niver in creation since the Arrk was there anny-thin' loike it! All thim settlers along the Hawkesbury were washed off their places, an' their bastes an' corn an' wheat swep' out to the ocean itself. They tell me the Nepean River, back the way ye came, rose a hunder feet, an' well I belave it. I'm jist goin' down to Sydney now to see what's in the wind. How about comin' along, son?"

Mark hesitated and looked at the gipsy. The latter made no sign and Mark nodded his head. "I'd like to see the place. Is it as big as Parramatta?"

Brady slapped his thigh boisterously. "T'ree toimes the size, wid stone houses an' a shop an' all. But there's goin' to be doin's be the whispers that's goin' aroun'. Guv'nor Hunter's gone back to Lunnnon an' Cap'n Bligh's Guv'nor now, so maybe thim

foine officers that's bin runnin' things to suit their pockets is goin' to be brought up wid a round turn. Ye'll have to lave yer horse behind, son. On'y gintlemen can afford to ride, so we'll pad it on our own flat feet!"

Once they drew aside into the bushes to let two horsemen pass. Mark recognized the foremost as Captain Macarthur sitting stiffly erect in the saddle, while the man in blue livery following close behind was evidently a servant. Brady cocked his head knowingly to one side.

"Somebody else besides oursilves seems to be in a hurry for the news, me son. Put yer best fut foremost, an' we'll be in Pitt's Row in another moile."

Mark found so many strange things to claim his attention after they passed the clearing with its few cottages on Brickfield Hill that he found it difficult to keep pace with Brady. The orderly rows of cottages with their picket fences, some with neat plots of flowers laid out in front, the bustle of men in uniform in the vicinity of the barracks, and finally the busy scene that unfolded as they topped the rise that looked down on Sydney Cove took his breath away. It was his first view of a ship. Brady at last gave up the attempt to drag him along.

"Listen, me son. I've got to see a man over here at the Rocks an' I'll be back afore long. I'll wait for ye at the bridge over the Tank Stream here so ye can have a good look round by yesilf. Ye see that house across there wid the flag flyin' in front av it? Well, that's Guv-mint House, an' don't fall foul av the sinthry."

Mark made his way slowly across the head of the Cove and up the incline toward the Governor's

residence. The air was rank with the smells of rotten fish, decaying seaweed, and the pungent odour of tar, superimposed on the flat raw tang of salt water at ebb-tide. He wanted to look down on the settlement from the top of the hill, all unconscious that he was nearing the spot where his mother and John Sim had first met and planned their escape. But just as he reached the picket fence skirting the garden of Government House, the two horsemen that had passed him on the road pulled up at the front gate.

Peering over the fence he saw a middle-aged man dressed in a blue coat and white breeches, with white stockings covering his fat round calves and a funny sort of three-cornered hat on his head, pacing up and down the path with his chin sunk on his chest. As the horsemen dismounted, the sentry saluted Captain Macarthur, who returned the salute stiffly and passed through the gate. He was dressed in a fine blue coat with gold buttons that glinted in the sun. He had a canary-yellow waistcoat and white breeches like the other man, and as he drew near he swept off his hat with a fine bow. The thick-set man in the three-cornered hat bowed stiffly as though it hurt him to bend at all.

Scraps of conversation floated to the boy's ears, but they conveyed less than the actual tones and gestures of the speakers. Macarthur seemed to be trying to make an impression, but judging by the curt responses of the other he was making little headway. Their course brought them toward Mark, Captain Bligh looking rigidly ahead, Macarthur bending toward him. Then the three-cornered hat shook decidedly.

"All very well, Mr Macarthur, but you can't eat wool!"

"But, Your Excellency . . ." They reached the end of the path and turned away. As they approached the second time, the little thick-set man seemed stiffer than ever. He almost appeared to bristle. Suddenly he turned to face the other.

"Mr Macarthur," he barked, "I know all about you! What have I to do with your sheep, sir? What have I to do with your cattle? Are you to have such flocks of sheep and herds of cattle as no man ever heard of before? *No, sir!*"

Macarthur, taken aback by the direct attack, seemed at a loss for words.

"But, Your Excellency . . . you must realize that this grant came to me direct from His Majesty's Government."

"I have heard of your concerns, sir!" retorted the other with considerable heat. "You have got five thousand acres of land in the finest situation in the country—but by God, you shan't keep it!"

Mark's eyes were fixed on Macarthur as he bowed stiffly in parting. His face was white, the nostrils flaring with suppressed rage as he turned away. Then a cloud of dust swallowed him as he galloped swiftly back to town.

Two years later he was to re-ascend that hill at the head of an armed force to depose the Governor who had rebuffed him. But in the year 1808 Mark was to be too occupied with his own affairs to worry about contemporary history.

CHAPTER X

ABOUT the time that Napoleon was making his last attempt at disturbing the peace of Europe, Jack had attained full manhood. He was tall and dark and the suns of twenty-four summers had tinged his skin a rich bronze under which the long smooth muscles rippled easily. He had the sharp gipsy features, the thin hawk nose of his father, and warm brown eyes with the spirit of mischief and laughter ever lurking in their depths. But he was taller than his father, slim and active as a wild cat, and the carefree indolence of boyhood remained only as a cloak that became more and more threadbare with the years.

He was as reluctant as ever to assume any form of responsibility that did not fall in with his inclinations, but in times of stress he could fall to and work with a fury that left the sturdy Mark far behind. If he had inherited any trace of the unswerving, dominating spirit of his mother it was still dormant within him. Work unconnected with his horses and cattle appealed to him only as something to be done when one was tired of doing nothing—which was seldom. He would swing a willing axe when the job in hand was the building of a stockyard, but the routine job of cutting firewood for the kitchen was too dull and prosaic for him. There was no end to it and nothing remained as a monument to one's toil but a heap of ashes.

Yet as far as her dried-up emotions allowed her, Ann was content to sit and watch him with a light in her eyes that was reserved for Jack alone.

Whether he was handling a refractory colt in the stockyard or whooping joyously on its back arched like a horseshoe as it bucked around the hut, snorting and squealing shrilly in its efforts to dislodge him, or even the sight of his slim figure engaged in some variant of idleness woke a warm feeling in her breast. Jack himself was quite unaware of it. Ann had brought up her sons in an atmosphere as sterile of emotion as could be imagined. If she had ever imprinted a kiss or betrayed any sign of affection toward them, neither they nor any one else was aware of it.

Their early days had been lived in a perpetual atmosphere of danger and alarms. They had imbibed with their mother's milk a sense of constant watchfulness, in common with the other young wild things of the bush, and Ann's spartan rule of those early days gave little opportunity for demonstrations of the softer quality from either side. The woman's femininity had been destroyed before their birth; all through life they had toiled together on an equal footing with no concession to her sex.

But during the past ten years Ann had failed physically. The hideous months of prison degradation had inflicted hardships from which she could never recover, and the hard years that followed each held the strain and worry of a normal decade. She was only a few years past fifty, but her straight, spare figure was now bowed and gaunt, and every year seemed to have a shrinking, shrivelling effect on her. The family had not noticed it. They had always been together and the change had been slow if persistent. But a gradual re-allocation of duties had taken place. They hardly affected Jack; but

nowadays, on Mark, or occasionally on John Sim, devolved the work in the vegetable plot or at the woodheap, and the other jobs outside the kitchen that she had once unflinchingly performed.

John Sim was nearing sixty, but beyond the greying of the big black beard that jutted out over his deep chest, and a stiffening of the joints, he was hale and undaunted in body and spirit as ever. He was still the patriarch guiding the lives of the Valley; leading the raids, now few and far between, for they had come to use more legitimate channels of commerce to supply their needs. But the reiving spirit ruled strong as ever: if a coveted bull or horse or ram was not to be had by fair means, it found its way to the Valley just the same.

All unknown to the colony, to its autocratic officials, its census takers and its most progressive of all Governors, Lachlan Macquarie, Esq., there lay hidden away in the Valley a nucleus of stock that was collectively unrivalled on the continent. The mysterious losses of valuable imported animals or their progeny, that occurred from time to time, were blamed on the natives or the bushrangers—as the roving bands of escaped convicts that prowled and harried the fringes of the settlement were called. The existence of an ambitious stock-rearing colony beyond the bounds of settlement was never dreamed of.

The gipsy still refused to venture near the cultivated areas in daylight. But Mark and Jack, attired in ill-fitting dungarees for the occasion, and passing themselves off as settlers' sons, penetrated as far as Sydney at times and kept in touch with the increasing progress of the colony. Although another

drought was on the land, the Valley was as yet in no great danger from overstocking.

The steers were easily disposed of through Brady, who had blossomed out as a dealer and landholder of some importance, partly as the result of foreclosing on loans to improvident settlers. He had also recently added a grog shop to his possessions, and as his stock in trade comprised the chief currency of the colony, he looked on himself as a banker of sorts.

None of the old black Cape bulls remained in the Valley, and the younger cows were all descendants of Suffolk and Durham bulls. It was only a question of time when the light-quartered black cattle with their humps and flat horns would disappear altogether. The gipsy's keen interest in the results of his breeding operations was marred by only one thing: at the bottom of his heart was a desire to match his cattle and his horses against those of the rest of the colony, to compete with the "Pure Merinos" as the big landholders were called. But as an outlaw he knew that his triumphs could never pass the periphery of the great official circle.

Under the able guidance of Macquarie, the bounds of the colony were extending north, west, and south. The once impassable barrier of the Blue Mountains had been conquered by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson. And now, William Cox with gangs of convicts had built a road through them in the space of six months—a great undertaking. West of the mountains a great stretch of fine country was attracting the settlers, and Macquarie was encouraging his explorers to push still farther on and find out what lay in the unmapped hinterland. Evans discovered there a great river which mystified the

party by flowing inland instead of toward the ocean. He named it the Lachlan in honour of the Governor. They returned hot-foot with the inference that the heart of the continent was a great inland sea!

Each thrust of settlement constituted a fresh danger to the Valley. Doctor Throsby had occupied the coastal land opposite the Five Islands and his men were pushing inland. Fertile hills and a broad valley lay between them and the rugged forest country that screened the Valley. But the gipsy knew his safe tenure was almost at an end and he would have to move out before the advance of settlement cut off his retreat.

Two routes lay open to him. There was the undefined native track circling north through the mountains toward the new-found Bathurst plains, but the task of getting the cattle through that wild precipitous country would be stupendous. Remained the country to the west.

Jack had been through there in his yearly walkabouts with the natives. Beyond the unwatered belt of dense rugged forest lay the Big River that never ceased running. A country of giant trees and green pastures where there was room for all for years to come. A country that the settlers clinging fearfully to the overstocked, eaten-out coastal strip had never dreamed of, and where the gipsy and his herds would be secure for the remainder of his life span.

But his reluctance to leave the Valley made him procrastinate. Ann was averse to any more roving, and all that he himself wanted was the opportunity to end his days here where his restless spirit had grown accustomed to a peace and stability he had never dreamed of. Life had little more to offer Ann

and himself; but the future of the boys had to be considered. Sooner or later, Mark was bound to merge with the flow of civilization. He was still the silent steady member of the family, broad-shouldered, deep in the chest, and strong as a horse. Often nowadays his blue eyes clouded with a recurring problem that he refused to discuss, but the purport of which the gipsy guessed intuitively, because it was troubling him too. Mark was still the sheepman. He had bred up a nucleus of pure merinos; as fine as any in the colony. But his ambitions were fettered by the lack of outlet, and the everlasting need for secrecy that kept him from discussing his hopes and experiments with the men who were carrying out the same work within the settlements.

Strangely enough, Mark found himself less tongue-tied in the presence of Brady. The ex-lag's apparently aimless loquacity was full of cunning leads to tempt his audience; yet, for all his talkativeness, Brady, drunk or sober, had never betrayed the family's secrets, and he was a veritable fountain of information concerning all that happened in the colony.

"Have ye niver bin down to see owld Paymaster Cox's sheep?" he inquired of Mark. "Thim he bought off Cap'n Watherhouse when he left the colony. Next to Macarthur's they're about the best. An' the owld man's got his head screwed on the right way, for all he wint bankrup' tin year or so back. Then there's Palmer an' Docthor Throsby, but they're loike owld Flog-'em—they're afther growin' mutton an' niver min' the wool. An' they tell me Sir John Jamison's bringin' out some foine bulls an' horses an' maybe a few sheep wid 'em."

Mark nodded a trifle impatiently.

"I know. I've seen their sheep."

"Well, then, what more d'ye want? To hobnob wid the Pure Merinos thimsilves?" Brady smacked his rump joyously at the thought. "Well, ye'd have a better chanst since Macquarie put them in their places. Afore he come, there was on'y the Pure Merinos an' the muck—you an' me an' all the lags in irons an' out av 'em. But Macquarie's a man, even if he does hanker to put his name on ivery buildin' that goes up. An' he knows that there's men as good an' better among us that did our time as anny av thim redcoats. What d'ye think he towld a crowd av thim the other day when a depytation bowls up to tell him who he sh'uld say good day to an' who he sh'uldn't? Macquarie lissens to all their big talk, knowin' what some on 'em wuz afore they bought their commissions in the owld Rum Corps. He looks 'em up an' down wid that quiet smile av his: 'Gen'lemen,' sez he. 'My experience, so far, is that there are two classes in the colony. Those who were transported an' those who ought to have bin. Good mornin' to yez!'" Brady rocked with enjoyment.

"An' what d'ye think happened t'other day?" he continued, warming up to his best vein of scandal. "Owld Macarthur that's still bein' kep' in Lunnon since he ran Billy Bligh out av the colony, sint out a cargo av rum, thinkin' to make as much profit out av it as he did in the owld days. But he didn't know that Wentworth an' Blaxcell an' Riley had got the handlin' av all the rum for offerin' to build the horspittle, so they takes Johnny Macarthur's shipload at nine shillin' the gallon an' sells it thimsilves at thirty-six shillin'. Och! can't ye jist see

him hoppin' off wan leg on to the other when he hears av it?"

"But what has that got to do with his sheep?"

"Iverything! Didn't he buy that rum wid the money he got for his wool? Foive-an'-sixpence a pun' they paid him in Lunnon. What'll owld Flog-'em Marsden say to that?—him as won't grow wool because ye can't eat it."

Mark sat up, his eyes half-closed, as the importance of the news stirred up the matters that were • uppermost in his mind. Wool at five shillings and sixpence a pound! And his own best sheep grew nearly five pounds now. But what use was that to him when his wool could never leave the Valley. If he tried to sell it, people would want to know who owned the sheep that grew it; where it was grown; and how all those fine sheep existed without anybody knowing anything about them.

Brady glanced at him from one corner of a cunning eye.

"Why don't ye go down an' have a good look at Macarthur's sheep an' him out av the road? Sure, Mistress Macarthur's as foine a leddy as there is in the wurrl'd, an' her seein' to all the sheep an' cattle an' horses there wid himsilf in Lunnon for years now. Look here, me son: step down to Brady's Ho-tel this avenin' an' I'll presint ye to Misther Dowling himsilf. He's the wool-classer fella that's going out to Camden in a day or two for the sheep washin' and shearin'. They tell me it's a great gift he's got for wool. They're all afther him to class their wool afore it goes to Lunnon. But for all that, none av thim can git the fancy prices loike owld Macarthur."

As a result, Mark spent day after furtive day in

the bushes fringing the Nepean watching the sheep-washing operations on the opposite bank of the river. Two men soaked the sheep separately in a tub of warm water, lathered them with soap, then, from a stage, threw them down into the water where a man standing up to his waist in the running stream ducked the animals and rinsed the fleece vigorously, washing out the accumulation of dirt that had lodged in the wool. Then he passed it upstream to his mate who completed the rinsing, then the sheep was allowed to scramble into the draining-pen.

A few days later the shearing started. The circle of convict shepherds bending over their sheep with the shears snick-snicking away and the pure white wool falling before the blades. When the animal was released, a grotesque white skinny thing, the fleece was picked up and rolled into a snowy-white ball.

Mark struggled hard to overcome the shy diffident habits of a lifetime. He desperately wanted to stand beside Dowling watching him examine and assess the fleeces, comparing the length of staple, the fineness and the faults, before putting each one carefully away in one of the tall bins grouped round the walls of the wool-house. Later, when the shearing was over, the fleeces would be placed in the big canvas bales and compressed tightly by the huge screw-press, the only one in the country. The other settlers laid their fleeces flat on top of one another and tramped them into packs slung from the rafters. Marsden and one or two others shipped their fleeces packed in casks.

Lying out there, concealed in the bushes, Mark found himself comparing his lot with the lives led

by these other people. He had no yearnings toward social status, but the ways of the big landholders were a complete enigma to him. Where Mark and his family managed to express themselves satisfactorily with their scant direct vocabulary, these other people used a flowery language cluttered up with strange words the meaning and purport of which were far beyond his comprehension. In the Valley each knew the other's ways so thoroughly that speech was only a means of corroborating what had already been thought out and decided in one's mind, and only the unadorned essential words were necessary for the purpose. It seemed strange that people could not say what they had to say and be done with it. These people strove to find more and more words to elaborate a simple speech and the one who could find most seemed to be most thought of.

Clothes were another problem. Why should they need all those complicated, uncomfortable, tight garments of thick cloth. Blue coats, red coats, black coats—all the colours imaginable; waistcoats of a different colour and breeches of another, for all the world like a lot of gay chattering parrots in attire as well as in manner. In the hot days of summer they sweltered in the same uncomfortable dress as in winter—a mad idea.

But these were only side issues to a deeper problem. He had watched these people—the Pure Merinos, the emancipists that formed the growing middle class, even the lags themselves; observed their comings and their goings and their habits. The contrast between their communal life and his solitary existence irked him more and more each time the thought woke in his mind. For all their

lack of freedom they moved about freely among themselves, and they had privileges that he coveted but that his upbringing had rendered inaccessible.

These men, too, had their women. Most of the women had children. Mark, who never felt at his ease among strangers, had an absolute terror of women. Those with whom he had come in contact were chiefly the convict type employed as servants or married to the dungaree settlers and ticket-of-leave men. They were a bold, hard, foul-mouthed lot, and when he felt their disillusioned predatory eyes fixed on him, Mark retreated in haste. In short, women represented a bundle of mystery that he felt incapable of understanding or even approaching. Yet each time he retreated, his failure and his shortcomings added to his misery and despondency. He would have given anything to possess the easy manners of these dressed-up parrots with their women.

Jack's inhibitions, on the other hand, were of little consequence although he had seen even fewer white women than Mark. Once in every year Jack threw off his few clothes and disappeared for weeks at a stretch when the blacks' signal-fires announced a walkabout. What transpired on these trips Mark never inquired, but Jack invariably returned hard as nails and worn to a shadow; and for days afterwards he never did a tap of work. At meal-times, however, he excelled himself.

Mark wanted a mate. His sheep and horses and cattle mated naturally. Why then had it been made so difficult for him to approach one of his kind? He had no wish to take a native wife, yet the prospect of living with one of these loud-mouthed, slatternly trollops that every transport disgorged was equally impossible.

CHAPTER XI

JACK'S preparations were watched with mounting interest by the other members of the family. Judging by the amount of ball and powder he was collecting, he was getting ready for a long trip. He packed meat and damper into the two bags fashioned from one piece of hide to hang one on either side of a horse and rest on the sheepskin that the rider sat on. When he met the gipsy's inquiring glance Jack looked carelessly away. But the elder man remained.

"Goin' far?"

Jack nodded casually.

"Which way?"

He motioned with a thumb toward the south.

"Over to the deep valley—the Kangaroo Valley. Mebbe over to the sea."

"Goin' by yerself?"

Another nod. The gipsy turned slowly away. Jack might be going to look for grass and water for the cattle—or he might not. They would know when he returned. It was part of the family etiquette never to question any member as to their doings abroad; but it was equally understood that the person concerned would volunteer some hint as to where he had been, as well as any outstanding news items; and of course, as part of the family tradition, the whereabouts of any likely animals that might improve the Valley herd or flocks.

Mark had not enlightened the family much about his last trip. Since his return he had been moody and even more reserved than usual, which was say-

ing a lot. Beyond a mumbled remark that he had seen Brady and that Macarthur was shearing, he left the family to their own reconstruction of how he had filled his time. Jack had intercepted the worried, questioning glance that Ann threw at the gipsy. John Sim had merely raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders as he turned aside, so the younger brother was left to his own inferences. Perhaps Mark was thinking of taking a woman too.

Poor old Mark! For the life of him Jack could not picture the type of woman that could live with Mark; more, he could not imagine his stolid, tongue-tied brother making advances to any woman. Anyhow, whether Mark intended to live alone all his life or not was his own business.

Jack certainly did not. The annual walkabout with the blacks was all right in its way, but it was not enough. Last time a strange feeling of hostility throughout the tribe made him cut his visit short. It appeared that the comely young gin of old Naroola had given birth to a piccaninny amid much rejoicing. But the rejoicing gradually gave way to wonderment and suspicion as the child, in spite of numerous smokings over the fires, refused to turn black. Not only did it remain pale skinned, but its nose was not the broad flat nose of a native baby. Eventually it disappeared—no one knew how or where. Jack's next visit drew no seductive side glances from the gin. On the contrary, she patently avoided him, and when the gins went out to dig roots with their sharp-pointed sticks she stayed well in their midst, nor did any of the others show any desire to dawdle behind.

John Sim had also dropped some hints of late bearing on the subject. The old man's mind was

full of theories about breeding and the mixing of strains. Since he had commenced to breed out the old black cattle with the new English bulls, and Mark's attempts at breeding out all traces of the old hairy sheep from his merino flock, Jack knew that many of the gipsy's remarks about the difficulty of getting rid of the black blood had been directed at him. Anyhow, what did John Sim want? What choice of wife had a young man in his position? What was there of his own colour except those worn-out trulls that the ships brought out. The gipsy himself must realize that a fine black cow would throw a better calf than a shelly old discard of any breed.

In any case, Jack was not looking for a black gin. The picture that was stirring his senses was that of the half-white girl of the coast tribe—a slim, olive-skinned, provocative slip of a girl with small round breasts. The long leagues of intervening forest, and the steep, rugged mountains that lay between the Valley and the sea were insignificant barriers to the pulsing heat of his desire.

A dense morning mist blanketed the Valley when Jack set out. Ann's bent figure watched him intently from a corner of the veranda, peering after him till he disappeared completely in the mist. His sudden departure, coupled with the elaborate preparations, left a vague unease within her. She knew instinctively that the boy had some premeditated goal, and she would have felt happier if the gipsy had been riding with him. The natives would not harm him, but the woods were full of fugitive convicts whose hands were against every one: they killed first and questioned afterwards. Still, he had always come back before.

Jack replaced the brush and the dingo traps at the passage in the barrier, then paused for a moment to look back on the Valley. He had passed above the mist, and the sensation of looking down on the clouds gave the cliff-top an added sense of height. The mist lay like a fairy sea covering everything below; it recalled that morning when they had looked down on the flooded Valley with only the tree-tops showing. He vaulted on to the bay horse's back and turned him with his knees toward the south-east.

The sun rose over the eastern hills and its light filtered down through the trees. From the crest of a ridge he could see the forest rolling endlessly away as far as his eyes could reach, a grey-green sea of tree-tops, fold after fold, rising and falling, climbing to a long, high range that challenged the line of his march. Everywhere the same unbroken, monotonous stretch. Its apparently endless sterility had been sufficient to daunt the hearts of the explorers. Even the runaways seldom penetrated so far. They did not know how to live on the country: of necessity they must skulk on the outskirts of settlement and take by force the things they must have. There were no paths to guide them, no landmarks; the uninitiated might wander for days without finding a drop of water.

Jack was at home here. The bushcraft that he inherited from a long line of gipsies had been sharpened and perfected in his boyhood among the natives. Somewhere in the back of his cranium that gift was located in a tiny cell. The aborigines had it in a highly developed state, and a few favoured whites were gifted with it; but the possessors of that unique power to find a way over trackless

country were invariably unconscious of the gift. In the years to come, the lack of that sense of bushmanship was to leave men's bones bleaching in every corner of the continent.

On the second day out he crossed a shallow stream just above the point where it hurled itself over sheer cliffs to vanish in silver mist upon the dense pattern of tree-tops and ferns hundreds of feet below. The rock walls of an immense valley gleamed red and orange and yellow in the morning light and the entire floor of the valley was a dense carpet of trees stretching away to the distant horizon.

Beyond the stream the country changed abruptly. The rider passed from the dim, straight columned aisles of the forest into a dense tangle of vegetation where he had to follow the narrow, tortuous paths made by wild animals in order to get through. He had reached the coastal belt with its huge trees and their strange fleshy leaves and buttressed roots festooned with creepers and vines throwing a network of ropes from the branches. Under foot the steaming earth lay strewn with nature's debris and the air was heavy with the smell of decaying vegetation. Plant-life ran riot in the rich red soil; grew and flourished and died as other stronger plants shouldered it aside in the thrust toward the light.

From the top of the steep range the ground dropped sharply into the deep valley below. Jack had to lead the horse and slash a track with the heavy knife he carried in his belt. Down below, the valley opened out in brilliant green clearings and groves of feathery-topped palms through which the stream tumbled cheerfully. Farther up the valley lay the pastures where the kangaroos

abounded. This was the Kangaroo Valley of the blacks, and their coveted hunting-ground. And here, Jack thought to himself, if conditions in the Valley became worse they might have to bring the cattle.

He camped in the valley that night with the mosquitoes keening over him and the dingoes making the night hideous with their howling. Next day he would reach the coast.

The climb out of the valley was not nearly so arduous as the descent. A faint native track wound a devious way to the summit, and after a further hour's journey he drew rein on the edge of a dizzy cliff with the blue ocean sparkling before him. From the foot of the high cliffs where he stood a belt of wooded country stretched to the sea. North and south lay a magnificent panorama of dazzling white beaches, long sparkling crescents of silver sand flanked by bold, rocky headlands.

Down to the south where a wide river gleamed in the sunlight, a thin column of wispy smoke ascended straight to heaven. Jack studied it intently for a while, then his legs closed on the tiring horse and he headed south.

The sun was setting in an angry red haze behind the western range when he reached the outskirts of the camp. It lay along the grassy bank of the broad, shallow river; close on a hundred bark gunyahs planted untidily about the flat, each with its tiny fire in front, and over all, the smell of decomposed and drying fish hung heavy on the air. He advanced openly on the camp amid a hullabaloo of barking, yelping dogs and the high-pitched cries of gins and children behind the waiting line of grim,

bearded warriors with spears and nulla-nullas in their hands.

A little way from the camp he slipped off his horse and tied it to a tree to the accompaniment of howls of fear from the younger children who thought horse and man were one, then he advanced boldly toward the belligerent warriors. Fifty yards from them he halted, laid his musket in front of him and, standing on one foot, placed the sole of the other against his knee. Then with right palm raised toward them he introduced himself in the Wanngal tongue.

"I am Camaroo. I come in peace!"

A bearded old warrior with craggy brows stepped forward. He placed his bundle of spears, his womera, shield and red boomerang on the ground and gravely repeated the gesture of peace, standing on one leg with right hand raised.

"Gwe-yong gives you the hand of welcome."

As Jack bent to pick up his weapon the black did likewise, and the white man walked forward to the semicircle of upright spears with a carefree smile on his face. They had recognized him and formalities could now be dispensed with.

The circle closed round him and he squatted on his heels, blackfellow fashion, in front of the old man. He knew enough of the dialect to make himself understood, and with the aid of the native art of gesture to amplify his words he had no difficulty in explaining his mission. He gave out that he had come for salt. His previous meetings with the tribe had been on the family excursions to the coast for that indispensable commodity, and he was soon at home among them.

He refused the hospitality of the old warrior's

gunyah, carrying with it the use of one of his wives. He would make his fire higher up the river as his *yarraman* could not feed quietly so close to the camp's innumerable dogs. As he rose to return to his horse, a smiling native with a long three-pronged fish-spear handed him a freshly caught mullet. Jack accepted the gift eagerly; it was years since he had tasted a salt-water fish and time had whetted his appetite.

He lit his fire close to the river-bank where a small creek trickled down from a ferny gully. There was an abundance of grass but the bay horse plainly preferred the sweeter grass of the inland, dry though it might be. The sea-breeze carried the ceaseless chatter of the camp to him; it also carried the pungent aroma of deceased fish. He squatted by the fire grilling the fish while a row of skulking curs from the camp lined the opposite bank of the creek. He scattered them with a well-aimed fire-stick and laughed contentedly as they fled yelping back to the camp. So far all was well. To-morrow he would look for the girl.

Daylight filtered slowly across a clear, cloudless sky and with it awoke the resurgent clamour of the big camp. High-pitched voices scolding and laughing, the howling of some gin feeling the weight of her lord and master's club, the crying of children and the yelping of dogs. The smoke of a hundred fires smudged the crystal perfection of the morning and wisps of pearly mist kissed the clear waters of the wide river.

Close to his camp stood a long-dead tree blackened by many fires. In its hollow trunk Jack hid his musket and ammunition and pack-bags, retaining only the plaited greenhide belt with the heavy

knife in its sheath at the back. Then, naked as the aborigines, he strolled leisurely down to the camp.

On the outskirts, the snarling pack of mongrels rushed out at him, but he knew their calibre of old and scattered them with a stick. Many of the bucks were still curled up beside their fires, but the gins were busy carrying bundles of firewood, cooking the morning meal of fish and performing the innumerable jobs that even the most primitive household demands.

Bundles of long red spears leaned against each gunyah. Plain hunting-spears, some cruelly barbed, and long, trident-like fishing-spears barbed with pearl shell. Two old gins were engaged in spinning a fishing-line from tree-bark, and farther on another was carefully grinding an oyster shell into the semblance of a fish-hook.

Then he saw the light-skinned girl. She sat under the leaning bark shelter of a large gunyah with two other gins, one old and withered, the other fat and broad faced, with heavy, pendulous breasts. The three were weaving a fish-net, holding the mesh stretched between their toes and working with practised hands, knotting and looping the twisted fibre. Jack stood still, his eyes intent on the girl in the shadows, willing her to look up, to meet his eyes for a moment. She seemed quite unconscious of his presence for a time, then suddenly she glanced up and saw him standing there, naked, slim and athletic, his skin lighter than her own, and a quick flash of recognition lit her eyes. Then a tug at the net recalled her and she hastily returned to the job.

The man stood quite still close to the leaning trunk of a great river-gum and the exhilaration coursed through him like the dancing motes in the

beam of sunlight streaming past his head. She was comelier than ever; plumper and more mature than when he had last seen her—and infinitely more desirable.

Then she rose to her feet and shook herself free of the bits and ends of fibre, and his heart dropped like a stone. She no longer wore the twisted possum-fur belt of maidenhood. She stood naked and unashamed in the shadow of the gunyah of old Gwe-yong.

CHAPTER XII

THE sun stood high overhead. Alone in his camp, the white man stared into the embers of his dying fire. The surprise at finding the pale-skinned girl in old Gwe-yong's gunyah had passed. He should have known that she would not remain unclaimed for long. The only difference it made was that he would have a few more fights on his hands before the affair was settled. But first he had to see the girl alone. He knew aboriginal camp routine well enough to find a chance probably that afternoon, and although he was well acquainted with the aboriginal procedure of taking a gin from another tribe, his white privilege made him reluctant to put it into practice unless his own powers of persuasion failed.

If the girl were pure native and he a black warrior, he would merely have waited an opportunity to seize the girl, club her into reasonableness or insensibility and carry her off. Jack preferred a willing bride. For one thing his flight would suffer less hindrance.

That afternoon the gins passed his camp strung out in little groups, giggling and shouting to one another. They carried sharp-pointed yam-sticks and dilly-bags and at least half of them had a piccaninny a-straddle on the hip. The fair-skinned gin was with them, and she raced past his camp, slim and fleet-footed, eluding the pursuit of a half-grown boy. She did not appear to notice the lone man squatted near the base of the gnarled old tree.

As soon as the last straggler was out of sight, Jack moved swiftly in pursuit, keeping to cover and

taking the utmost care to leave no sharp tracks for others to read. Their noisy chatter led him easily to the deep gully running into the high hills and filled with a thick profusion of tree-ferns and undergrowth beneath the big trees. A marshy stream seeped down through the black mud and tangle of ferns; there the gins were busy searching for lily-bulbs and anything else they might discover to help the menu. The girl was some little distance toward the rear of the crowd and, whether by design or accident, she was practically alone on the outer fringe. Jack wormed his way stealthily through the bushes till he reached a spot just in front of her. The girl looked up with a start to see a hand rise out of the bush ahead with one upraised finger cautioning silence. Then the finger pointed to the right, away from the crowd, and the girl turned off without attracting the least attention and disappeared.

Jack followed on her heels as swiftly and noiselessly as he could, crouching low through the thick screen. Behind a dense clump of lantana he came upon her seated on the grass. He drew himself erect, smiling down at her, and the girl, conscious of his inspection, turned her head aside, but as she did she flashed a coy smile from the corner of an eye.

The man threw himself on the grass at her side.

"What do you want?" she demanded. Her soft tones held no fear—only curiosity.

He regarded the thin lobe of her left ear; her head was still turned away from him and he had to repress a desire to pinch the ear between his fingers.

"Have you forgotten Camaroo?"

Her fingers played with the seed-head of a grass stalk.

"Camaroo is a white man," she replied.

"And you?" he demanded quickly.

She hesitated, twisting and knotting the pliant stem. "Birrong's father is of the black people."

"But Birrong's mother was of my people."

She turned her head, then her body, gradually toward him and her dark eyes held a provocative challenge.

"They say that the white man comes for salt."

He smiled meaningly back at her.

"It is well that they say so."

She made as though to rise, but his hand gripped her by the wrist. She turned indignantly.

"Let me go. Do you forget that Birrong is the gin of Gwe-yong?"

The grip on the slender wrist tightened and his words were significant.

"Gwe-yong is an old man."

"And Camaroo is a boy."

"Camaroo is a greater warrior than Gwe-yong and all his family." He drew himself nearer, speaking rapidly. "Camaroo lives far away—across the mountains. He is rich. There is plenty of meat and his gunyah is bigger than any you have seen. But his gunyah is empty and Camaroo sleeps alone."

The girl looked quickly around and her manner was plainly agitated.

"Let me go! Gwe-yong will kill you . . . and beat me!"

"Listen!" He held her a moment longer. "There is a place like this on the creek above my camp. I will wait there for you." He released her and in a flash she was on her feet and had disappeared

round the lantana. Jack lay back on the soft green turf with his hands clasped under his head till the shadows lengthened. A riot of day-dreams and plans surged triumphantly through his head and the smile on his lips had a look of permanence about it.

All next morning he waited impatiently in a little natural harbour hidden up in the dense bushes of his little creek. By midday he was still alone and at last he descended, disappointed, to the big camp. It was almost deserted, but from farther down the river came a chorus of shouts and yells and he wandered disconsolately towards it. He arrived as the big semicircle of nets, held by the gins and surrounded by the bucks splashing and smacking the water with flat sticks to frighten back the fish and scare off any prowling sharks, closed on a school of whiting. As the nets gradually confined the space, the clear water seemed alive with fish darting frantically here and there and leaping out of the water in vain attempts at escape. Gins and piccaninnies waded among them, scooping fish out on the sandy beach where they lay flapping, slim and silvery. Swooping clouds of seagulls added their screaming to the general uproar.

The nets drove the stragglers into the shallows and the drive was over. Gins pounced on the struggling fish and seagulls darted daringly close. A tall native beckoned to Jack to help himself from the catch and, as he picked out half a dozen of the biggest he could find in the general turmoil, he found himself beside old Gwe-yong. Birrong and the fat gin were close at hand folding the dripping net.

"Good fishing, Gwe-yong," he hailed.



The old man made a gesture of contempt toward the fast-disappearing catch.

"Woman's work! To-morrow the men go fishing with spears to the *murray-bado*—the big water. You will come?"

Jack hesitated and shook his head with a show of reluctance.

"My *yarraman* frets and will not eat the salt-water grass. To-morrow I must take him farther up the river."

The old man grunted and scrambled up the bank. The idea of a man giving up a day's fishing for the sake of an animal was more than he could understand. The fat gin followed him with the folded net on her head, the water from it trickling down her fat shoulders. The half-caste girl gathered her fish into a dilly-bag and Jack waited with apparent casualness at the break in the bank that she must pass. She slung the bag on her back and started off. As she passed him she paused imperceptibly on the steep slope and the man caught a whispered message:

"The *yarraman* will find grass where the big rock runs out to the river."

He waited till she was well ahead, then walked leisurely back and built up his fire to cook the fish. He would not need this camp much longer.

The first hint of dawn found him astir. He left his fire burning, packed the bags on the bay horse, and started off up-river. Half an hour's ride brought him to the place he sought. A rocky bluff ran out from the hills toward the river, its sheer dark outline forming an unmistakable landmark. He left the horse to graze and climbed to a point where he could see a long way back without being seen.

The sun rose out of the distant sea and lit up the dark cliff at his back. He could hardly keep still on his hard and uncomfortable perch, and the waiting seemed interminable. At length he saw someone stealthily approaching. The faint movement of a bush, the vaguest suspicion of a moving body, but never a sight of the actual person. In spite of his impatience, he had to admire the exquisite bushcraft.

He moved down to the edge of the clearing, and there they came face to face, the man smiling, the girl a trifle shamefaced but attempting to cover it with a cool defiance. She stood before him, slim and straight and golden skinned, taking no notice of his outstretched hand. A nod of his head indicated the distant camp and his eyes supplemented the question.

"Gwe-yong?"

"Fishing—down by the sea."

His eyes gleamed with satisfaction. The men would not be back till nightfall. The pursuit could not commence before morning. He had almost a day's start, but he knew he would need it. He advanced a step toward her, his hands outstretched.

"Come, Birrong. We have far to go."

She retreated with well stimulated surprise and fear in her eyes.

"No. I will not go. I belong to Gwe-yong!"

He closed on her, smiling down into her startled eyes when, with a lightning turn, she fled headlong through the bushes. Fully prepared for the move Jack darted after her. She ducked to right and left, trying to elude him, till with a bound he threw himself at the elusive figure, caught her round the waist, and as she fell they rolled into the long grass.

The girl fought like a trapped possum, beating his face with her hands, scratching, kicking, biting, but his arms only tightened round her, crushing her to him until at last he held her, panting and helpless. As a final gesture of defiance she sank her teeth into the firm flesh of his shoulder, a hard, savage bite that made him draw his breath sharply and crush her vindictively to him; then, her resistance at an end, she yielded. Her end was accomplished. The trackers would read from the trampled ground that she was no weak, submissive gin but a woman of spirit.

She eyed the bay horse with real fear in her eyes. She could travel faster on foot, she protested. But Jack was firm. They would both have to travel on foot across the deep valley and, in any case, she would leave no tracks this way. So she clung tightly to the rider, her arms round his waist, as the horse pranced and pirouetted under the extra weight. Then, as his gait settled down, her terror abated, but she soon became conscious of a great and growing tenderness. Many days would elapse before she would be able to sit down with comfort.

Night descended as they slid down the last steep pinch into Kangaroo Valley. The horse showed signs of strain under his double load and the girl was exhausted with the unusual mode of travel. It would be impossible to climb out of the valley in the dark through that awful tangle of scrub and vines, so they camped near the stream, not daring to light a fire.

The first hint of daylight saw them on their way again. Jack led the way on foot, slashing a passage with his long knife. Birrong followed, carefully nursing the heavy musket and leading the horse.

As he hacked his way up the steep slope, Jack found time to think out his immediate plans. Provided the alarm had not been given before nightfall, Gwe-yong and the avenging party would only have left the camp on their tracks that morning. •

He desperately wanted to get out of this dense coastal country where the spears of an entire tribe could line a path unseen. Back in his native forest he felt himself a match for Gwe-yong and all his relations. There was no possibility of avoiding the fight. By tribal law, Gwe-yong had to avenge the stain on his honour, and Jack had no intention of being a passive target for any man's spear. In addition, the odds would be against him and he would need all his strength, all his knowledge of the blacks' battle technique, and his white man's intelligence to circumvent them.

The summit was close at hand and the track seemed clearer. He turned to replace the knife in its sheath when Birrong, at his back, gave a shrill cry. He wheeled like a flash to see the savage, bearded features of Gwe-yong barring the head of the path. The naked black body streaked with the red paint of war towered menacingly above him. The eyes gleamed evilly and a long red spear was poised in the right hand drawn back and tensed for the throw.

In a second, Jack's hand plucked the pistol from his belt. Death stared from the dirty-white eyeballs and the barb of the avenging spear. He fired point-blank. A cloud of smoke hid the crumpled figure of Gwe-yong and the loud report filled the air with screeching flocks of parrots and every other bird in the valley. Jack jerked the musket from the nerveless fingers of the terrified girl and dashed up the

path. Through the trees he caught a glimpse of a warrior in full flight. There must be others, but now was the time to profit by their panic-stricken retreat from the unknown fire-arms. He must get out of this thicket before they took up his trail again.

Birrong stared with frozen eyes at the body of her late husband. Her feet were wet with his blood, but that was a detail she was past noticing. It was her first experience of fire-arms and she looked at her new master with a sense of mingled awe and fear. Then, as she turned at his curt command, she picked up one of Gwe-yong's spears and followed swiftly.

Jack mounted the tired horse and urged him as fast as the difficult nature of the ground permitted. Birrong followed close behind with the long spear in her hand and every sense alert for the pursuers. The undergrowth began to lose its density; the horse could shoulder a way through it instead of having to seek a devious path. Then the straight, dark columns of the hardwood forest opened up before them and the rider breathed a long, deep sigh of relief.

They stopped to drink at the dwindled stream above the waterfall and thenceforward the pace was slackened. Jack deliberately crossed every clearing, hoping for a sign of the pursuers. This was his battle-ground and he was ready for them. The issue must be decided before nightfall. He was not going to risk a shower of spears in the dark.

At the edge of a long, narrow clearing he threw his trousers to the ground and rode on for a quarter of a mile. Under cover of the trees he dismounted and, leaving the horse standing with lathered flanks

and drooping neck, made a wide detour to cut his tracks back where the discarded trousers lay.

The girl refused to be left behind and followed at his heels with the spear gripped firmly in her hand. He chose a position at right angles to his tracks with a clear view of the clearing, and sank to the ground with the musket at his shoulder. Birrong lay flat on the ground, her body blended into the dark shadow cast by a tree-trunk. The shadows crept eastward and lengthened, and still there was neither sound nor movement except the interminable buzzing of the flies and the stray notes of the birds. Then the girl touched him lightly on the foot with a finger. A dark figure glided into the clearing, bundles of long spears in one hand and the long, narrow red shield in the other. Close behind emerged another warrior.

The man on the ground eyed them grimly. Two—he anticipated more. The musket would reduce the odds by one. He would challenge the survivor himself. They followed the easy tracks of the horse with long, tireless strides. Then at sight of the discarded garment ahead they halted with suspicion in the centre of the clearing and, spreading out, advanced cautiously, the leader fitting a spear to the nick in the wommera in readiness for attack.

Jack took steady aim at him—he could hardly miss at the range—when his ankle was clutched convulsively. He turned his head quickly to see a third warrior within a dozen paces of him in the timber. They caught sight of one another at the same instant. As the spear arm jerked up, the pistol covered him, and, with the roar of its discharge, the spear flew harmlessly overhead.

The pair in the clearing spun for an instant to

face the surprise attack, then leaped for the safety of the bush. Just as the leader reached a tree the musket roared and he threw up his hands and pitched forward.

The white man sprang to his feet, leaving the useless musket on the ground. From the dying man close beside him, he snatched shield and spears and advanced boldly to the edge of the clearing, waving the native weapons and shouting his challenge to the other.

A boomerang whistled across the clearing, but the aim was bad. He laughed loudly and derisively and taunted the thrower with the choicest opinions of his birth and marksmanship that the language was capable of. He changed his position to get the sun out of his eyes, chanting an old battle song of the Wanngal and spitting epithets at the man hidden in the timber.

A shadow appeared from behind an ironbark and a spear hummed viciously at the lone figure in the clearing. He stepped easily aside and at the same moment launched a spear at the thrower. Next instant the warrior bounded into the arena, spear in hand and shield before him, the red stripes of his crafty bearded face and straight lean limbs bright in the sunlight. The gladiators circled like panthers seeking an opening to attack. The white man feinted and ducked as a spear passed over his head with a vicious hum. Again he tried the same trick, but the other reserved his attack and took up a position with the sun on his side.

The white man moved stealthily for a better position and, with a lightning movement, jerked a spear at his opponent. Its point splintered the edge of the red shield and the opponents glared savagely

over their shields at one another. Two spears each remained.

Long shadows crept across the clearing and a kookaburra laughed derisively from a tall, dead bough. The white man moved gradually closer, keeping the shield in front of him and watching the spear-point projecting past his antagonist's guard. The time had come for strategy.

As his spear sped purposely wide he threw back his arm and hurled his last in quick succession while the warrior's spear sizzled close to his ear. The white man's spears were finished; only his shield remained. The other stayed motionless for a moment, then, rising in triumph to his feet, he launched his last weapon at his opponent. With a lightning movement, an arm shot out and plucked the final spear from the air and, before the astonished black could snatch the stone tomahawk from his belt, the white man stood over him, threatening him with his own spear. The battle was over.

The black bared his teeth in hatred and awaited death. The hard eyes of the man above bored down on him and a voice hissed between the teeth:

"Go and bury your dead!"

The native stared, but remained motionless.

"Go back to your people!" the even voice commanded. "Tell them that honour is satisfied and the tracks have been washed out in blood. Go!"

CHAPTER XIII

LIFE in the Valley moved on its uneventful round after Jack's departure. Each day showed a diminution of the water in the hole in front of the hut; morning and evening clouds of rising dust followed the hungry cattle in their endless search for the grass that existed only in stray, high pockets difficult to reach. The short, sweet grass had completely disappeared and the coarse, rank tussocks were eaten down to the roots. The fleecy clouds that sailed majestically across the clear blue sky continued to mock the anxious family. They were well enough acquainted with the weather signs now to recognize these as the flaunting banners of drought.

After a week of her son's absence, Ann began to worry. She spent hours sitting on the low stump on the corner of the veranda where she had watched him ride away. She slept badly at night. It was not altogether worry but the gnawing pain in her breast was getting worse and, without any knowledge of what it portended, she felt a dumb desire to have all her family with her.

Then one evening she spied the bay horse coming from far away in the scattered timber and her heart leaped. She rose and rested her arm against the veranda post, shading her eyes against the sun with the palm of the other hand. Then she began to wonder if her eyesight were playing tricks with her. That was Jack on the horse, but there was someone else—a slim figure with weariness in its gait—walking beside the tired horse. She closed

her eyes for a minute, opened them again and looked steadily across the sun-baked plain. This time there was no doubt, there *were* two persons, and—fear tightened her heart and almost stopped its beating—the second was a woman, a native, naked as Eve.

She tottered back to the stump, her hands pressed to her pounding heart. Her son . . . Jack . . . with a wife . . . *a gin!* Slowly and painfully she rose to her feet and made her way blindly to her little room where she buried her face in her hands. She had forgotten how to cry, but her dumb agony of spirit was all the more terrible.

Birrong drew closer to the horse's shoulder. There was something strange about the big, strongly built gunyah with the wisp of smoke emerging from the pile of stones on one end. There was more than a trace of fear within her, too, at the thought of the reception she might encounter. She had already joined one household, displacing two gins in the eyes of their lord, and she knew too well the things that might and did happen to the newcomer.

From far back, her keen eyes had caught sight of an old bent form, quaintly attired. She could see it no longer. Had Camaroo lied to her! Did he already have a gin at his gunyah! She glanced up at his tired, smiling face. It was not smiling at her; his thoughts were far ahead, his eyes were on the hut and she stiffened her lips in preparation for opposition.

Then from a tall railed enclosure, a broad burly figure with a heavy beard walked out to meet them. She recognized the jut of that beard and the sight of it allayed her suspicion to some extent. Jack turned his horse toward the gipsy and the girl could

read the surprise in the older man's eyes. John Sim met his son with a sharp, inquiring glance and the young man answered with his disarming smile. "This is Birrong!" he said simply.

"She is . . . yours?" the old man asked.

Jack nodded, then the gipsy turned slowly to the shrinking girl and the surprise and anger in his eyes gradually gave way to a brusque kindliness. His huge hard palm descended on her shoulder and pressed it gently till the girl looked up shyly but with returning confidence. Then Jack slipped to the ground, pulled the bridle off the worn-out horse and the three walked together toward the hut.

Just before they reached it, the gipsy turned to his son and, indicating the girl at his side with a nod, asked:

"Won't they come after her?"

Jack shook his head with a full measure of assurance.

"They came!" he replied laconically. The gipsy understood; the details did not matter.

Ann was stooping before the fire adding dry wood to the glowing coals she uncovered from the bed of white ashes. At the gipsy's call she turned and surveyed the trio framed in the doorway without moving a feature.

"Jack's back," the gipsy said. "An' he's brought a wife."

Ann rose to her feet. She did not even glance at her son; her hard grey eyes swept the girl from head to foot in slow deliberate inspection. Birrong shrank behind her husband. She was afraid of this bent, shrivelled old woman with the stony eyes full of cold disapproval and hate. She felt that there was something wrong with herself; the old woman's

eyes said so plainly, but she had no idea what it could be and at the moment she longed desperately to be back in the smellful atmosphere of old Gwe-yong's gunyah.

Ann turned abruptly toward the door of her room.

"I'll get her something to cover her nakedness!" was all she said, then her mouth snapped shut to a thin sharp line.

Mark's introduction to his sister-in-law was not the surprise it might have been. As he brought his sheep in to the fold at sundown, his keen eyes fell on the tracks of Jack's horse, then with a start, on the small footprints running beside it. He started at the thought of a woman in the Valley. So Jack had brought home a wife—a gin. He knew by the wide space between the big toe and the other toes imprinted in the dust that no white woman had made that track. But he was unprepared for the slim olive-skinned girl with the head of straight black hair, and her figure enveloped in one of Ann's shapeless one-piece dresses. He stared for a moment, then took his place at the table without a word.

Birrong! The native word meaning a star.

She sat opposite him on a newly-placed block with a sheep-skin on top, uncomfortable and ill at ease. All her life she had eaten squatting on her heels beside a fire, with a pack of half-starved mongrels hovering behind to snap up the scraps.

After the meal when they had collected some soft sheep-skins and a firestick to light their nuptial hearth, Mark's eyes followed them till only the red eye of the torch bobbing uncertainly in the darkness marked their progress. Then he turned on his side on the hard bunk and stared into the night, envying his young brother with all his heart.

Birrong found her first week of married life in the Valley a greater trial than any bride ever condemned to live under the eye of a mother-in-law. Although she had her own bark gunyah a little farther down the creek, Ann insisted on teaching her such rudiments of the white folks' cuisine as her scanty kitchen utensils and narrow scope of viands could compass. Birrong soon began to long for the fish and shellfish that had formed the staple diet of the camp. The scarcity of salt was another tragedy. There was only meat—mutton or kangaroo principally—grilled on the coals, boiled or stewed. Ann proceeded to initiate her into the mysteries of the black iron pot with a total disregard of the fact that the girl understood not one word of English.

She was an apt pupil, however. But she never ceased to hate that dark smoky kitchen, and, above all, the wearing of that cumbersome dress—the symbol and reminder of those first awful moments when she and Ann had met. It seemed to act as an extinguisher on her light spirits as soon as it slipped over her head.

She still feared her mother-in-law, but since Ann had recovered from the initial shock of her unannounced arrival, there was a daily softening of the stony reserve behind which the elder woman had entrenched herself. The gipsy was Birrong's favourite. There was a twinkle in the brown eyes lurking behind the forest of greying whiskers that always woke at sight of her, and she responded to it, shyly at first, until her natural ease returned to stay, and she joked and giggled with him in her daily efforts to learn English.

On the choice of his partner, the gipsy offered no

criticism to his son. But one day when the two were riding through the cattle, Jack pointed to two calves—three-quarters pure-bred yet totally dissimilar. One was a shapely roan heifer with all the good qualities of its English ancestry; the other had thrown back to the black cattle in colour and conformation with the pronounced hump on the shoulders and coarse hairy hide. The gipsy's reply came slowly, and with the difficulty of a man who had made economy of words a life-time habit.

"Ye always want to be careful, son. Breedin's a funny business. Put a good red bull to the old black cows an' the first calves are much alike. But put the same bull to them calves an' ye'll get a mixture—some better, some throwin' back to the old strain." He paused a while and only the muffled padding of the horses' hoofs was heard. Then:

"Ye've got a hard row to hoe, son. *The black blood keeps comin' out!*"

At the moment, the purport of the gipsy's words was lost on Jack. Years afterwards, however, they were to ring in his ears, and they were to go echoing down generations of Sims still unborn.

Conditions in the Valley were getting daily worse and the dry summer and autumn were giving way to the prospect of a drier, harder winter. One evening, the gipsy called Mark and Jack to the side of his bunk on the darkening veranda. He found it easier to express himself in the dark. "There's goin' to be no rain, I'm thinkin'," he commenced, then paused for a while. "We'll have to shift afore it gets worse." Another pause. "Where d'ye think we can get feed—an' water?"

No reply was forthcoming, so he turned to Jack. "How about the Kangaroo Valley?"

Jack moved restlessly where he squatted with his back against the wall of the hut. He did not want to see that spot again. "It's full o' kangaroos'n emus an' dingoes," he hazarded.

"Well, where can we go?"

"Big River, mebbe."

"Mmm. . . . Kin we get 'em there?"

"Dunno. I'll go an' see."

And so it was decided. That night the pack-bags were filled again in readiness for the trip. Then the first domestic difficulty arose. Birrong stubbornly refused to stay behind in the Valley. She was chiefly actuated by her abiding fear of Ann. Rather than risk the chance of her carrying out her threat to go back to her own people, Jack decided to take her with him. He selected a sheep-skin for her saddle and into the surcingle he plaited two loops of greenhide to act as stirrups.

They made an early start next morning, Birrong astride a quiet old mare with the big toe of each foot stuck rakishly through the stirrup loops and the long shaft of Gwe-yong's spear across her knees. She threw a last look over her shoulder at the hut and pushed on impatiently, endeavouring to get out of sight of Ann so that she could pull off her dress and be her natural self again.

Once again the Valley household fell back into its old routine. But although everything seemed to be unchanged—just Mark and John Sim and herself as of old—Ann found it impossible to recapture the spirit of the old life. For a day or two she enjoyed the peace and quiet of the kitchen; only the soporific buzzing of the flies broke its dim quietude, and their incessant humming added to the atmosphere of peace rather than disturbing it.

Then in spite of herself, she began to miss the company of the light-footed girl with the startled brown eyes. She knew she had been hard on the girl—unnecessarily hard—and she knew, too, that when the girl came back she would continue to appear hard, but she had to keep up appearances. At her time of life, after the hard, grinding years she had endured, she refused to show any chinks in her armour to any one. But she was glad the girl had come. It would hurt her as much to see Jack returning alone as it had been a shock to see him arrive all unheralded with a stolen bride.

Then one day, just after the midday meal, she was taking her customary look toward the Valley entrance when she saw something moving down the creek. It was neither a horse nor a cow, and it was nothing like a sheep. It was more like a man hurrying down to the waterhole . . . as though he were perishing for water. Could it be Jack! She brushed the thought quickly aside. He was too well versed in the ways of the bush to get into such straits . . . unless he were hurt . . . crawling back to the water he knew.

She moved impulsively forward, then stopped abruptly as another figure rose to its feet from the edge of the water hole. An unkempt, burly individual with a ragged red beard dripping with the mud and water he had wallowed in. His baldish head was sunk into the thick body, giving him a neckless simian appearance that matched his sinister demeanour and was not minimized by the broad black arrows plastered freely on the tattered threadbare jacket.

He peered brutishly at the old woman, then pick-

ing up a musket advanced lumberingly in her direction.

Ann stood her ground, the threat of danger straightening her bowed shoulders and lighting the old fire in her eyes.

"What de ye want?" she demanded.

"Summat t'eat," came the surly response. "An' quick! An' after that, powder'n lead an' what guns ye've got!"

Ann eyed him levelly.

"Food ye'll get, but nothin' else!"

The lag stood menacingly over her; he turned his head and sent an impatient hail to the rest of the gang still quenching their thirst. Then, with an angry growl: "We'll take what we want an' athout your say-so. Get out o' the way, ye owld . . . !" With a savage snarl he raised the butt of the heavy musket and brought it down with a crash on the defiant grey head.

Ann crumpled to the ground at his feet and lay very still.

Without a glance at the still form, the convict lurched on toward the hut with another of the band trailing a musket at his heels. The shout had brought the gipsy to the doorway and at the sight of him, the man stopped in his tracks.

John Sim's eyes opened wide. His glance swept the intruders, then fell on Ann lying in a silent heap, and with a low inarticulate sound, he started forward. The second lag threw up his musket, but the gipsy came on unheeding, concerned only with the fate of his mate. The musket roared. The gipsy spun round under the impact of the heavy ball and dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV

THE convicts glanced quickly round to see Mark running from the direction of the stockyard, and cursing savagely they turned and ran for the timber.

Mark bent over the gipsy. Blood oozed copiously from his shoulder, staining the hand that pressed against the flow and dripping to the ground. His bearded face was white under its tan, but the eyes were alive like spots of fire.

"Never mind me!" he gasped. "Get *her*!"

For the first time, Mark became conscious of the inanimate bundle on the ground. He ran toward it and touched the thin shoulder with a frightened hand. Ann lay limp and very quiet; a great discoloured bruise reached down one temple. Mark's eyes contracted to mere points of hate against the murderer. He picked up the sagging form, so thin and light, in his arms and carried it quickly into the hut where he laid it reverently on the table.

He hastened back and assisted the gipsy to his feet and half carried him inside.

"Shut the door. Bar it, man! . . . An' git the gun!"

Mark looked dazedly up from the still features of his mother, barely comprehending the order. The gipsy, half reclining against the wall, lifted his head and savagely repeated the command.

"They'll be back, I tell ye! Git the gun an' shoot. . . . *Kill!*"

Mark heaved at the heavy door, stiff with lack of use, with a powerful shoulder. The exertion spurred his mind to the need for action. He snatched a

musket from the wall, gave a quick look to the priming and peered from a high slit of a window. Four men were approaching, the murderer with the musket in the lead, angrily beckoning to the others to follow. Mark waited, a strange frozen calm encompassing him, till the emboldened quartet were within easy range, then he raised the musket slowly, took steady, deliberate aim and fired.

The gipsy quivered at the explosion. The hut was full of acrid smoke and out on the flat, three convicts were fleeing headlong out of range while one lay twitching horribly in the sun. Mark let the gun slide against the wall and turned his attention to the woman outstretched on the table. The gipsy beckoned him away with dull eyes in a head that moved from side to side with slow fatality. "She's gone!" his lips muttered thickly.

The younger man stood aghast, his eyes fixed with inarticulate sorrow on the pale lined features of his mother, then he turned slowly away. The gipsy's head sagged to his broad chest and Mark, stepping quickly forward, caught him before he slumped to the ground. A pool of blood lay under him. He cut the thick shirt away and exposed the ghastly wound. The bullet had almost torn the arm off. The limb hung useless and the red blood welled continuously.

He slashed a length from a roll of stuff in the store-room and wrapped it tightly against the wound. The gipsy's heavy eyelids opened. "The gun . . . shoot . . . never mind me." Mark compressed his lips and his eyes were tragic with his helplessness to stop the life blood seeping away. Again the gipsy's eyes commanded him and his flagging strength forced his lips to frame the words: "Kill 'em . . . afore they burn us out!"

Mark rose and peered out of the loophole. Two of the bushrangers were squirming from tree to tree toward the hut. One pushed a musket ahead of him. There was no time to reload; he picked up his own gun from the wall, sighted with a deliberation and care that precluded all chance of missing, and awaited the moment.

When the smoke cleared away, one of the two was legging it back to his mate as fast as he was able; the other lay still.

The baa-ing of his sheep returning to the fold from force of habit drew Mark to another window. He watched them stringing along in a dusty line till something halted them suspiciously. The two surviving lags were circling them to cut off the leaders. Mark watched impotently while the men rushed through the scattering mob. He saw one of the ewes brought to earth, a knife flashed in the sun, then the dust thinned and the two lags bent over the carcass. Soon the smoke of a fire rose from the edge of the trees, just out of gunshot. He fired a shot at them, nevertheless, by way of reminder.

Mark turned back to attend to the gipsy. He lay motionless on the floor, his eyes closed and his bearded face pallid. It was maddening, this inability to stay the bleeding; he had no idea what he could do, and the sense of impotence and the realization that life was ebbing with every precious second made a maelstrom of his thoughts. He knelt beside the wounded man and pressed the sodden pad against the shoulder; his hands were red to the wrists, but he pressed on till his arms were numb.

A bullet tore through the bark roof, followed by the sharp report of the musket. Setting his teeth he picked up a gun. It was empty, and so was the

other. A quick glance revealed that the men outside had taken advantage of his inattention by repossessing the weapons of their dead comrades. As he hastily rammed the charge a new sound came to his ears—the rapid drumming of a horse's hoofs. He climbed to the window just in time to see a lag scrambling hastily from the stockyard, urged to speed by the threat of reinforcements for the besieged.

He rammed a bullet home, primed, and took a flying shot at the fugitive, but missed. He and his partner were racing for the timber.

Then the horseman swept across the open stretch straight for the hut and, far in the rear, a slight figure urged the old mare to top speed, belabouring her flanks with a spear-shaft. Jack threw himself from his horse, the momentum carrying him against the half-opened door, throwing it back on its hinges. And there he recoiled, one hand clutching the door-frame for support as the grim details of the dim interior struck at his consciousness.

He moved slowly to the table and touched the still features of his mother with a faltering, uncertain hand, his eyes wide with incredulity that death should ever have touched one whom he had regarded as imperishable. He had never contemplated life without her familiar presence. And then he turned to the gipsy on the floor, with Mark, pale and desperate, still trying to stanch the wound that had almost stopped bleeding because there was no more blood left to flow.

Jack bent over the deathlike features. He opened the heavy eyelids and the gipsy looked up at him with his last lingering spark of life. The eyes seemed to struggle to say something for which the

strength to compel the lips no longer remained. Then their light glimmered and faded, and the gipsy joined his mate.

At that moment the shadow of Birrong appeared in the doorway. Fear had possessed her since she saw her man disappear into the deserted house. The premonition of disaster, of death in its grim silence, had taken hold of her in those last desperate yards, and at the sight of the still white features of Ann she shrank back, and from her throat rose the quavering death-wail.

The two men rose slowly to their feet and in the eyes that looked dumbly into each other's, a fierce red lust for revenge overcame their grief. Jack was the first to move. The line of his jaw was set and rigid as he turned to the door with a swift movement, checking his brother as he went.

"You stay here!" he commanded. "I'll git 'em!"

The drumming of his galloping hoofs cut short Birrong's eerie wailing. Her duties to the deceased gave instant way to her more important duty to the welfare of the living. She rose abruptly, snatched up her long red spear and, like a dusky valkyrie, urged the tired old mare toward the looming battle.

The bodies of John Sim and Ann Smith were laid together on top of a high funeral-pyre of logs. Their going was attended by no more elaborate ceremonial than that in which they had lived. Simplicity and the rigours of necessity surrounded them in death as in life, but with their passing it seemed as though from their ashes their rugged qualities of determination and fearless independence had passed to their sons.

The blue eyes of the quiet plodding Mark wore a

new air of purpose. And Jack, for the time at least, shed his casual air of indolence and day-dreaming. There was decision in his movements, in every line of his features, and his brown eyes took on the unswerving gleam of the gipsy's. Each understood and accepted the change in the other, and the exigencies of the weather forced them to shoulder their added responsibilities at once. Mark opened the subject.

"What's the road like?"

"Dry!" The gravity of Jack's features underlined the terse statement beyond the power of adjectives.

"Can we shift 'em?"

"Not all."

"You mean . . . ?" Mark's eyes held the balance of the question.

Jack nodded. "There's dry grass, but water's far apart. The horses'll do it, an' the strongest of the cattle. But the sheep . . ." His head moved slowly from side to side.

They sat in silence for a time, each busy with his thoughts. Then Mark asked quietly: "When'll you start?"

Jack understood perfectly: Mark was staying with his sheep. He had never anticipated any other course.

"Soon's things is ready. Water's gettin' lower every day." He looked up from his preparations a while later to remark: "Saw some o' the old tribe on the Big River. White men hunted 'em out of their own camps, and the other tribes'll kill 'em if they hunt on their grounds."

He paused to let the germ of his unspoken idea sink in. Several minutes elapsed, then Mark nodded quietly.

"Tell 'em to come. I'll feed 'em and they might be of help."

They mustered the horses first. Mark retained his own horses, and they decided to leave the old stallion, the oldest mares, and any with young foals in the Valley. That left nearly thirty good horses to go with Jack. The quietest were fitted with pack-bags loaded with wheat and flour and meat. Axes, shovels and other tools, the bulk of the fire-arms and ammunition, sheep-skins, and a few blankets comprised the loads.

Then one morning at daylight they scoured the Valley, rounding up the cattle into one great mob, and started them toward the exit. Mark was accompanying them on the first stage of the journey. Before they left the Valley, Jack rode through the cattle, cutting off the old cows and any with young calves. There were not many of these, as the drought had reduced their numbers.

Man and horse moved among the cattle as though they were part of each other; swerving, pivoting, anticipating every movement of the cattle they were drafting and thwarting their every effort to escape. The horse entered into the spirit of the work with an eagerness that had to be kept under careful restraint; it seemed to sense instantly the animal that had to be cut out and, as soon as the rider got into position just behind a beast, the horse was on its toes, head and ears erect, ready to twist or wheel like lightning at the least touch of the rider's leg or inclination of his balance.

The cattle toiled up the steep slope through the barrier and into the dense timber—a long broad stream of tossing heads and horns and black, red, roan and tawny bodies pouring past. The hot air

quivered with the crashing of their heavy bodies through the undergrowth, and the loud bellowing of relief at leaving the bare pastures.

At last they were all up. Jack stayed behind to block the exit, then he rode along the cliff-top for a last look at the Valley. There was nothing green down below, the ground was brown and dusty, and the olive-green foliage of the trees hung despondent under the grey mantle of dust. He looked long and steadfastly at the hut, taking his last picture of it thus. Then as he turned away, his eyes fell on the black patch where the funeral-pyre had stood. He gulped at the lump in his throat and turned slowly after the cattle.

The following day Mark left them to take back with him the weaklings that had already dropped back to the tail. The brothers did not shake hands; the pattern of their life had never included that formal gesture. They merely sat their horses facing one another, reiterating the plans they had made for the future with exaggerated casualness in their tones.

"I may follow you some day," Mark said. "Depends on the white folk."

"The blacks I send back'll tell you where I am," Jack replied. "An' if you want a hand any time . . .!"

Mark nodded farewell to Birrong sitting slim on her horse with one of Jack's stockwhips coiled in her hand. Then he turned to his brother and, for a space of seconds, their eyes communicated the messages that the owners' tongues had never learned to express. It was their farewell.

The younger brother swung his horse sharply after the cattle, loosening the lash of his long stock-whip as he went. The thong circled and fell with a

crack like a pistol-shot—all his repressed feelings went into it—and the first mob of cattle to travel that virgin country headed for the mighty Murrumbidgee.

CHAPTER XV

MARK returned to a valley peopled by ghosts, and for weeks he lived in a loneliness far more acute than mere solitude. Although he had always been shy and retiring he had always had a background of a family comparatively more talkative than himself. The lack of that background now affected him more than any other member of the family would have been affected under similar circumstances. The continual silence preyed on him. He longed desperately for the cheerful mocking laughter of his young brother; even the unobtrusive presence of his mother would have made all the difference.

He became seized with the fear that in time he might even lose the power of speech through disuse. The thought halted him and he stood mouthing a few words, timidly at first, then gaining in strength as the strangeness and self-consciousness wore off. He talked to his dog, to the sheep; he got into the habit of thinking aloud, till eventually it dawned on him that if the habit became permanent he would be forced to live alone for the rest of his life or run the risk of being dubbed a madman.

He began to avoid the hut altogether. It was a haunted place. Never again could he eat a meal at the table without seeing before him the grim burden it had carried. Each familiar article in the place held an association with the people who had gone, and the sight of them was a constant reminder that the owners would never return. All the things they had created: the hut, their garments, the crude

furniture, and those articles that were regarded as peculiarly their own—the gipsy's musket, Ann's iron cooking-pot, their accustomed seats at the table—had for so many years been looked upon as complements of their owner's personalities that the feeling still persisted.

Mark could never rid himself of the idea that their spirits still owned the hut. He continued to use it as a store-room, but he never cooked or ate within its walls any more. He moved his few personal belongings to the gunyah built by Jack and Birrong. After strengthening it and making it a more permanent shelter against the rain and biting winds of winter, he left the old hut to its spirit occupants.

In the weeks until the wandering natives arrived, his only companion was his old mongrel dog. The aborigines comprised two of the older bucks of the tribe that had camped near the hut at the Cow-pastures, with three gins and as many half-grown piccaninnies. They had their fears of the Valley, too. Its location had been known to the tribe for long generations, but it had been shunned as the abode of *debbil-debbils* despite the game that had crowded its pastures.

Now, however, they were travel-worn, weary and dispirited. The white man had driven them from their ancestral camps; his cattle and sheep ate the grass of the hunting-ground and left none for the game. There remained only the choice of staying on with the white man; subsisting on the scanty offal that might be thrown to them, and having their women taken from them by the ruthless conquerors, or skulking on the fringes of the hunting-grounds of other tribes where they would eventually

be driven off or killed. Better then to live in the shadow of the white man they knew and chance the *debbil-debbils*.

In spite of the relief afforded by the lighter stocking Mark decided to take his flock up to the valley through which Jack had taken his cattle. There was still water in the deeper holes of the creeks and patches of dry grass through the timber. So until rain came with the spring, he and his blacks led a nomadic life.

Under his teaching, the natives made fair shepherds during the daytime, although they could never resist the impulse to desert the flock when they crossed any fresh game track or spied a bees' nest in the hollow limb of a tree. The gins were far more dependable than the men, but Mark had to do the night watching by himself. No native, male or female, could be relied on to keep awake after dark.

They built sheep-folds by felling small trees and piling them lengthways to form a circular enclosure. Mark spent the nights under a sheet of bark with his gun ready for the everlasting dingoes, his dog tied to give warning on the opposite side, and a chain of fires strung around the fold. When they exhausted the grass in the vicinity of one camp, they moved to another waterhole and built a new yard.

When the rain eventually came and they moved back to the main Valley, Mark decided on a new scheme. He no longer drove the sheep to the fold at night but gave them the freedom of the Valley and allowed them to choose their own camping-grounds. His native helps he put to making the Valley proof against marauding dingoes. This was far more in their line than tending sheep and the

arrangement suited all parties—particularly the sheep.

Under the new scheme the improvement in the sheep was something to marvel at. They broke up into small flocks and roamed the Valley at will. They knew where the sweetest grasses grew, they drank at the creek when they felt inclined with no danger of being pushed into the stream by surging scores of thirsty sheep behind, and lingered in the process just as long as they liked. The strong sheep developed wonderfully, and the mortality among the weaker and older members and the lambs was reduced to a minimum since they were no longer driven beyond their powers to keep pace with their stronger brethren.

When Mark yarded his sheep preparatory to washing them for shearing he was astounded at the improvement in the wool. The fleeces were almost twice as heavy as previously, the wool was longer, and by reason of the free life on green pastures and the cessation of the nightly folding and continuous driving, the wool was pure and white and softer than any he had ever handled.

He was highly elated at the discovery, but, at the same time, the fact that he could not divulge the news robbed him of his enjoyment of it. His position in the Valley was unique; he could let his flock run free, but no other settler in the country had the advantage of a securely walled pasture. Even though they fenced an area by the ordinary dog-leg method, a continuous line of fallen tree-trunks straddled by crossed saplings on which a "jockey" was laid to add to the height—they would still have to guard against the night raids of dingoes, bush-rangers and neighbours.

In any case, who would listen to him? He was not only unknown—from an official point of view, neither he nor his flocks really existed. But it hurt him to have to leave his beautiful wool to rot in the Valley. With the sole aid of his raw assistants, shearing was a lengthy process that lasted for weeks. The natives enjoyed washing the sheep; their high-pitched laughter filled the Valley as they soaped the obstinate animals and threw them to a grinning gin in the creek to be ducked and rinsed. But shearing was a different matter. They loved the sharp snicking shears, but the persistent back-breaking toil of shearing was not at all to their taste.

One day, Mark discovered that his provisions were almost exhausted. The drought had killed most of the crops in the vegetable patch; such as survived had been accounted for by wombats, and his native assistants had appetites out of all proportion to the amount of work they performed.

He would have to barter some cattle for a further supply of wheat and flour, but first of all he would have to make his arrangements with Brady. He left the blacks in charge of the Valley and rode to Brady's old farm near Parramatta. It looked spick and span with a better show of cultivation than it had ever grown before. A big broad-shouldered man of about fifty was hoeing the corn, and Mark walked across to find Brady's whereabouts. The man ceased work to eye the strongly-built stranger with the long hair and blond beard, dressed in threadbare dungarees. He looked more like a bush-ranger than a settler, and a man had to be careful these days. So he nodded civilly and replied to the curt questions.

"Mister Brady's in Parramatta, I'm thinkin'. He was here this mornin'."

"This place is still his?"

The other nodded quietly and leaned on his hoe.

"I'm jist workin' here."

Mark hesitated. He would excite too much attention if he rode into Parramatta, and the copse where they used to leave their horses was now cleared away and growing a crop of oats. "I'll leave my horse with you till I get back."

The man followed him to the boundary and led the way to the yard, still keeping a good grip of his hoe. A glance at the quality of this uncouth individual's horse had confirmed his early suspicion that the man was a bushranger; only a gentleman or a bushranger could afford to own a horse like that, and no gentleman got about with his bare brown skin showing through the holes of such old dungarees and with never a boot to his feet. Still, he seemed a harmless, quiet sort of man for all that.

Mark made his way diffidently into the town of Parramatta, avoiding the main street with its traffic and its idlers before the houses and the inns. He eventually sighted Brady in the yard of the Red Cow, resplendent in a claret-coloured coat and top boots, supervising the harnessing of a pony to a smart looking gig. He looked stout and prosperous, but his changed circumstances had not affected his flow of language. He failed to recognize Mark till the tattered individual lounging about the yard whispered "Brady!" then moved away toward the open parkland. Brady overtook him, travelling as fast as his age and build would decently let him.

"Where in Cree-ation did yez spring from, man? I thought yez had gone away to look for this new

sea in the centher av the counthry. Are ye be yersilf? An' where's th' Owld Man?"

"He's finish!" Mark used the native idiom; he hated the word "dead."

"*Finish!* D'ye mean he's dead? Mother av Mary! *He* never died in his bed, did he?"

Mark recounted the whole story in quiet, disjointed sentences. His long sojourn with only the natives to talk to had impaired his English. Brady listened intently and his grief was genuine.

"The dirty, thievin', murdherin' blagyards!" he muttered. "To kill a wumman and a man like that an' niver a chanst to save thimsilves! Owld Macquarie shuld give ye a grant av the land for riddin' the earth av the scum. An' the young fella? Isn't he wid ye?"

"No, he went away with the cattle in the dry time."

"Save us, then, ye're all be yersilf out there? That's no life for a young fella."

"I've got the blacks there."

"An' what company are they to a man? Ye want a wife an' a fam'ly to help ye."

Mark shook his head and looked away across the little tree-clad hills that lay behind the town. An instinct to confess his troubles to Brady, to discuss things with him, was beginning to stir in him, and Brady, sensing that the interview was likely to be a lengthy one, let himself stiffly down to a seat on the ground. Mark squatted on his heels at his side, tracing strange designs in the dust at his feet with a twig, and after a few stammering starts, he gradually unfolded the story of the family.

Brady listened with a growing air of incredulity. He was bursting with a spate of questions, but he

dared not interrupt the narrative. Then when it was over, Mark's blue eyes looked unwinkingly into his.

"I'm tellin' you this, Brady, because you kept quiet about us before!" The chilled steel of the gipsy lay behind their veiled threat, and Brady sensed that John Sim had left an inheritor stronger even than himself.

"Tell me, man. . . . How many sheep *have* ye got?"

Mark looked dubious. "Oh . . . a lot!" His arithmetic was limited to what he could count on his fingers.

"As many as owld Marsden?"

Mark thought a while, then nodded.

"More!"

"As many as owld Macarthur?"

This time there was no doubt about Mark's negative. "But I've got better sheep than him," he added proudly.

Brady slapped his thigh with gusto.

"Man, but I'd like him to hear ye say that! He's got the best sheep in the colony."

"They would be if they ran free like mine!" Mark paused as though considering a vital step. Then he said:

"Brady . . . would you like to see my sheep?"

"Faith an' I wud! Say the word an' I'll be wid yez!"

"Come with me now!"

So Brady became the first white man, outside the family circle, to enter the Valley and live to keep the tale to himself. The security of the place amazed him. So did the sheep, the horses, and the cattle—rejects though the latter mostly were. Mark dis-

cussed his problems with him and found a ready listener.

Riding back to Parramatta, Brady outlined his suggestions and Mark, appreciating the shrewd mind behind them, accepted his offers. Brady said: "Ye'll want wheat an' flour, an' some praties for seed, an' corn an' things. Ye've got cattle to sell. But what's worryin' ye is the sellin' av yer wool. Well, listen. . . . Tommy Raine has opened a wool-store in Sydney, down at Macquarie's Point, an' he's offerin' tenpence a pun' for clean washed wool. It's sheer downright robbery for wool like yours, but it's the only way for thim as can't sen' it to Lunnon. They're gettin' up to five shillin' an' sixpence a pun' there."

"But I can't take all my wool to Raine," Mark objected. "He'd want to know where it came from."

"He'll take it from me," replied Brady soothingly. "I'm d'alin' in sheep an' cattle an' annythin' else that walks or lays down, an' there's niver anny questions asked av me. So you bring it to me at Parramatta an' take the wheat back. Or if ye loike ye can have the balance in pun' notes?" He laughed at Mark's puzzled expression and pulled several flimsy squares of paper from his bulky wallet. "That's money, me lad! We've got a bank in Sydney now—the Bank av Noo Sout' Wales—an' thim bits av paper's worth as many av thim holey dollars ye've got hid under the cabin floor as ye cud carry."

"There's wan other thing I'm goin' to do for yez. Ye met Wilson at the farrm. . . . He's a ticket-av-leave man I managed to git howld av, an' ye can see what he's done to the farrm. I'm thinkin' av sellin' it, an' if I do, I'll let ye have Wilson. He's a rale farrmer. Some high-handed squire in the Owld Counthry dispossessed him, he says, an' had him

thried for objectin'—wid a shillelagh to point his argyment—an' thransported. An' it's much obliged I am to that same squire! Now it's no manner of use yer sayin' No! I'll fix up about his ticket; a couple av gallons av currency'll settle that. He'll be av more use to ye than all the naked savages 'atin' yez out av house an' home.

"Ye've got jist over two t'ousand sheep there, an' thim mostly yowes, so if they go on incr'asin' an' growin' wool loike they're doin', ye'll be worth a fortchin. Ivvrybody in this colony's gone sheep-mad. But don't sell for all that! In a year or two, wid wool the price it is, a merino sheep'll be worth five pun'. Now not a word from ye! If John Sim hadn't drug me out from undher that tree foive an' twinty year or more agone, I wuddn't be here this day—an' annyway, I'll be chargin' ye the usual dayler's commission!"

True to his promise, Brady passed his ticket-of-leave man to Mark, and from that date, the slow but steady improvement that had been evident in the Valley flocks and herds, visibly accelerated. Wilson introduced ideas in management that Mark had never dreamed of. The man had farmed the Border district of Scotland, he had been a shepherd in his youth and had attended the Durham fairs where the great Shorthorn breed of cattle was being evolved by the Collings and Bates and Booth.

He knew little of merino sheep and nothing at all about fine wool, but he had listened with profit to the talk of the great breeders. Mark gave him the old hut to live in. Wilson was a methodical, cleanly soul and, after he had put his house in order, he set about building a new substantial home for Mark. It was not seemly, in his eyes, that the master

should live in a hovel and the man in a regular house.

One of Wilson's first suggestions was the erection of a stout post-and-rail fence across the narrow neck of the Valley. In this paddock they segregated the rams so that, instead of a scattered dropping of lambs throughout the year, a regular lambing period now resulted in March and April, and the combined watchfulness and care of the two white men reduced lambing mortality to a minimum. Wilson's companionship and his talk were having their effect on Mark also. Wilson had had some little education; he was a steady, conscientious worker, and his ambition had not been killed by the injustice that would have soured the lives of most men. Some day, when his time should expire, he intended to take up land for himself and to bring his wife out to a new home.

Wilson was a family man, and Mark regarded that side of his character with a curious detachment when his talk veered enthusiastically to his wife, to the son who had been at the end of his schooling when the father had been transported, and to the daughter who was now in service. Mark puzzled hard over the meaning of that last phrase, turning it over in his mind with vague wonder at its real significance. The man's attachment to his family was another thing he found hard to comprehend. There had been no words or outward show of emotion between John Sim and his wife, nor among any of the members of the family. Yet when disaster befell them, he remembered vividly the gipsy's dumb concern for the welfare of his wife, to say nothing of his own belated but none the less poignant emotion at their loss.

One day he casually mentioned to Brady, Wilson's desire to have his wife with him.

"An' a foine idee, too!" Brady replied warmly.

Mark thought hard for a few minutes, turning over the idea that was slowly taking shape in his mind, then he ventured. "D'ye think . . . could he send for her now?"

Brady nodded judicially. "He c'uld . . . if he had the cash!"

"I could give him some. But how could we send it to her?"

Brady had an inspiration. "I tell ye what! Instid av lettin' Tommy Raine have yer wool for nex' to nothin', send it to Lunnon. We'll send it in my name if ye loike. I'll see owld Flog-'em Marsden an' fin' out who to send it to, an' wid the money it brings they can arrange a passage for Wilson's missus."

When Mark diffidently broached the proposal to his man, Wilson stared in dumb astonishment. "D'ye mean it, sir?" he stammered. Then he turned slowly away to hide the tears that the astonishing offer had brought to his eyes. He came back to Mark and faced him with flushed cheeks, and his voice was almost inarticulate with emotion. "If ye do that much for me, sir, it'll never be forgot. James Wilson an' a' he has'll be at yer service for the rest o' yer days!"

It was Mark's turn to be disconcerted. Gratitude from others was a quality he had never encountered. That evening, Wilson looked up from the letter he was laboriously writing. "I'm tellin' her to bring oot the best sheep-dogs she can lay han's on. We'll show them fellas how to work sheep!"

In the meantime, from the base at Sydney, Gov-

ernor Macquarie's explorers were pushing far out, and a rapidly increasing populace was not only encouraging but following close on their heels, and in cases even outstripping the official surveyors. Oxley had pushed out from Bathurst to discover the Macquarie River; later he was to sail up the coast to find and name the Brisbane River after Macquarie's successor. To the north, Allan Cunningham had ventured beyond the rich Hunter River lands and discovered a way (Pandora Pass) through the rough ranges, opening up the wealth of the Liverpool Plains. Down south, Currie and Ovens explored the frigid heights of the Monaro. And settlers overran the old bounds of the County of Cumberland to such an extent that a new edict named it the Nineteen Counties. Settlement in New South Wales was now opened from the Manning to Moruya, from the Lachlan to the sea.

Sheep were booming; cattle and horses were in keen demand. A great land hunger possessed the people. The competition to grow good wool was encouraged by the high cost of freight which rendered uneconomical the export of all but merino and good crossbred fleeces. The rough wool was woven at Parramatta for local use, a settler receiving one yard of cloth for each five pounds of washed wool he delivered.

The reaching tentacles of settlement tended to revive in Mark the old unease that had been the ever-present bogey of the gipsy. His security was being threatened every day; the Valley was no longer beyond the bounds and he knew it was not large enough to carry the increasing flocks his ambition planned. Dr Throsby had already pushed beyond the Valley to take up Bong Bong, where

Mark had grazed his flocks during the drought. Hume and Broughton had founded a station at Lake George, away to the west.

Then a ship put in to Sydney with a piece of news that rocked the colony and established the reputation of Captain John Macarthur. A bale of Macarthur's wool sold by auction at Garraway's Coffee House in London had realized the unheard-of price of ten shillings and fourpence per pound—a record that set the seal on the work of the man who pioneered the fine wool industry of the new country; a record that would remain for all time.

Merino sheep were at a premium. Wool became a magic word to turn the heads of men and to fire their ambitions. A number of Pure Merinos formed the Agricultural Society, subscribing to a fund to import merinos, English cattle and horses and English grasses. Men who had once been loudest in deriding the country as a barren prison camp were now loudest in its praise. Everything was moving—onward, forward, the pace accelerating daily. The very air vibrated with progress.

Then one day, old Baloo-derry drew Mark's attention to a distant pencil of smoke climbing faintly into the southern sky. "Camaroo come!" he announced calmly.

CHAPTER XVI

AT Mark's call, Wilson came running at an anxious trot, wondering what untoward thing had happened; it was the first time he had ever seen Mark show the least sign of excitement.

"Jack's coming! ° My brother!" he shouted as Wilson approached. The man turned toward the valley entrance. He turned a puzzled look on Mark; *he* could see no sign of any one coming.

"Where did ye see him?" he inquired. Mark pointed to the distant horizon above the dark fringe of tree-tops surmounting the valley wall.

"That's his smoke!"

Wilson gazed in the direction for a long time; it looked to him like the smoke from any one's fire.

"But how d'ye know?" he persisted.

His employer and Baloo-derry were conversing rapidly in the old man's tongue, then Mark turned with an excited gleam in his eyes.

"They'll be here in two days. Jack and Birrong with four piccaninnies and a lot of cattle."

Wilson gaped.

"Did ye get a' that news oot o' that smoke?"

Mark nodded cheerfully. It seemed quite natural to him. But Wilson regarded him for a full minute as though he doubted his employer's sanity, then he walked away to his hut, shaking his head sadly. He didn't believe a word of it. If it *were* true, it was black magic—witchcraft. Men and women had been burned at the stake for less than that dirty old heathen was doing!

Next morning, Mark rode out alone to meet the

travellers. He encountered them before midday. His first sight was of a lean, dark-skinned horseman astride a big bay horse, out in the lead of a mob of cattle. They were mostly roans and reds, with some tawny polled bullocks and a few—very few—of the old black breed with light quarters and humped shoulders. Taking them all through, they were great, broad-backed animals, bigger than any he had ever seen, and fat as seals.

The brothers cantered toward one another and reined up knee to knee, laughing boyishly with unrestrained pleasure. The eight years of separation had changed them but slightly. Jack laughed outrageously at the size of Mark's blond beard, and noted that he had got heavier, broader shouldered and deeper in the chest. He looked as powerful as a bull.

Jack had changed less in physique. He was a trifle broader shouldered, but his lean figure was hard and sinewy. His speech was a queer mixture of English and Wanngal and Birrong's tongue. Mark found it difficult to follow his excited talk.

"What you think of my *bulago*?" he demanded, waving his stockwhip at the mob following behind.

"Fine! Better than any I ever saw!" Mark replied with sincerity. "It must be good country where you are."

"*Budgeree!*" Jack's whip gestured magnificently. "If you come there you never leave it. Come back with me. Bring your sheep."

Mark smiled a trifle regretfully. He realized that he would either have to move some day or keep the numbers of his flocks down. The Valley was already fully stocked. But . . . he didn't want to move until he was forced.

"Where's Birrong?" he demanded, postponing the subject.

"Back here!" Jack swung his horse on its haunches with an imperceptible effort, and they rode together round the cattle. Mark stared at the broadly smiling woman riding to meet him with a naked infant balanced on the possum-skin rug in front of her. Birrong had grown into a woman—a beautiful woman. She had not lost her upright figure, but she was mature, matronly, and her shyness had given way to a poise that accentuated her beauty. Her even white teeth flashed with her continuous laughing chatter. She no longer had any fear or awe of Mark, yet her friendliness had an unnerving effect on him. Perhaps if he had had a sister he would have recognized and responded to the frank, cheerful mood of his sister-in-law. But it touched some starved, repressed fibre, bringing it to life to his own embarrassment and depriving him of the power to reply coherently.

Birrong indicated with a peal of laughter the short skirt she wore. "You see . . . Birrong white woman . . . no more gin!" The garment was merely a length cut from a roll of material and fastened at the waist like a kilt, leaving exposed the slim brown legs that straddled the girth of the brown mare with confidence; from the waist upward, she was naked, her full round breasts eloquent of her motherhood.

"You got woman . . . , piccaninny?" she queried, and laughed pityingly as Mark shook his head. "Ah, some time you catchem woman . . . makem plenty piccaninny. You likem! Look longa *my* piccaninny!" She waved a brown arm and called encouragingly toward the far side of the cattle. A big

brown horse poked out from the timber, cautiously impelled by a child of about seven. Against its bulk she appeared tiny, perched on its back. Her skin was sunkissed to a golden brown with practically no trace of the olive tint of her mother, and her fine dark features were the counterpart of her father's. She wore a short skimpy frock and her bare heels coaxed the big horse toward the group. Birrong spoke rapidly to her in her own tongue, and the girl smiled shyly at Mark.

"This one . . . Ann," said Birrong by way of introduction, and Mark nodded with a wave of gratitude for the perpetuation of his mother's name.

"Two more little fella over there," laughed Birrong, pointing beyond the cattle. "He too much *myall* . . . too much frighten. Some day he all right. Nother one, little fella, he stay home."

Jack broke into the conversation.

"Plenty grass in the Valley?" he asked.

Mark nodded.

"It's all right. But I've got a lot of sheep now."

Jack's brown eyes opened with interest.

"What are you doin' with 'em? Sellin'?"

"No. Sellin' the wool. I might sell some sheep soon when the price is better." He went on to talk of the tremendous progress of the colony during the past eight years; how settlement had pushed out beyond the Valley, the increasing clamour for land, and the demand for stock which was already pushing up the prices.

"Have you got many cattle?"

"Plenty!" Jack's whip gestured in a grandiloquent circle. "Down on the Murrumbidgee they grow big an' fat an' get plenty calves. But I've got no flour, no salt, so I come in for more."

That day and the following day they discussed plans for selling the cattle and plans for the future. Jack was highly enthusiastic about the new country on the Big River.

"You should see the trees," he said. "Big, big trees; it takes good country to grow big trees . . . an' plenty of grass. Cattle don't have to walk about looking for feed; they just stand around an' grow fat."

He went on to explain his scheme for clearing country. When the trees were killed, the grass that grew there was better and sweeter than the open country.

"You remember how the Old Man nearly killed me when we were boys at the old hut because I cut away the bark round the trees an' they died? Well, I did it down there. These trees are too big to cut down, so we got axes—me an' half the tribe—an' cut a ring round the bark. Soon the trees die standing up an' the grass grows all about the ground. You come down there, Mark," he pleaded. "Your sheep'll grow as big as my cattle. There's only me down there: no more white men."

"But they'll come soon, the white men," Mark replied. "They've gone far beyond the other side of Sydney and out across the mountains to where the sun sets. Soon they'll find your big river . . . and what then?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"Plenty of room for everybody there. My river goes on an' on; you can ride down it for days an' never come to the end. All the time it gets bigger an' bigger, an' the tribes say it joins another bigger river, big like the salt water at Sydney."

Late the following afternoon, they dragged aside

the barrier and Mark rode down the steep slope into the Valley at the head of the suspicious cattle. Wilson stood outside the hut watching the sheep scatter before them, then he turned to examine the approaching riders and his eyes widened with consternation. He counted them—the white man with the short, glossy black beard, the woman with the baby in front of her, another slip of a child on the back of a big horse, then two smaller children, one in front and one clinging to the waist of a naked young gin on another horse. And in the rear, a miscellaneous group of mounted natives and gins drove a score of horses to water.

"One man, one woman and four children!" he muttered under his breath. He threw a glance of mingled awe and distrust at the wizened old figure of Baloo-derry standing erect with his compatriot, spears in hand, their belligerent eyes on the distant tribesmen.

The brothers rode to Parramatta to confer with Brady on the disposal of the cattle. The prosperous ex-convict welcomed Jack like a long-lost son and rubbed his hands with business-like glee at Mark's description of the cattle. Sell them? Aye, and as many more as they could bring him. Every one wanted cattle and sheep; at that moment he could dispose of anything on four legs that remotely resembled a cow, so great was the demand. Nevertheless, they arranged to market the cattle in small lots to avoid suspicion.

The Valley was perilously overstocked with the addition of the recent influx, and Mark was worried about his sheep. Jack had practically decided to bring a mob of cattle to market once a year. He could afford to sell from three hundred to four

hundred bullocks yearly and still go on increasing his herd.

Wilson took a keen interest in this light-hearted younger brother of his employer, and he soon infected Jack with his talk of the great Durham cattle he had seen in England. Jack had intended to take several new bulls back to improve his herd—whether by legal purchase or by the usual family method, he had not given any thought. But inspired by Wilson, he decided to get the best bulls the colony could supply. He even discussed the importation of bulls from England, and only a complete ignorance of all that lay beyond the colony prevented the furtherance of his plan. Jack's world was confined to the country he knew and lived in. He had no idea of the extent of the unexplored country that lay inland, but he had gained some conception of its vastness from the blacks who told him of the tribes they knew beyond their boundaries, and that other tribes existed far beyond them. Information which, perhaps, the best informed persons in Sydney did not know at the time.

The coastline formed a natural boundary to the east; that was the edge of Jack's world. He had seen the white sails of ships setting out into the unknown, bound for those vague, misty destinations that men called London and England and other outlandish names. Of these he knew nothing at all, not even sufficient for his imagination to build some pictures of the distant lands.

He did not intend to wait in the Valley until all his cattle were sold. He had left his main herd more or less under the guardianship of the tribe on whose land he lived, and he was well enough ac-

quainted with aboriginal ways to know what would happen if he were absent overlong.

The most outstanding change that had occurred in his absence, as far as he was concerned, was the establishment of a coinage and its gradual displacement of the old system of barter. Barter still went on, but chiefly in petty dealings or with those settlers who still refused to recognize value in bank notes. Jack's own inclinations were strongly in favour of barter, but Brady's persuasive tongue converted him.

In fact, when Jack discovered what could be effected by the mere display of a roll of notes, he entered on a glorious spree of spending which forced a worried Mark to accompany him on every trip to town. He bought for himself clothes that he would never wear more than once at the most, for Birrong modish gowns which she would wear only while the novelty lasted, and materials to make clothes for the children; flour and wheat, axes and chains and all manner of tools, until Mark reminded him that he would have to use half of his bullocks to carry back his purchases. Jack retorted by buying a dray and harness. And he gave the inhabitants of the Valley several hectic moments when he broke in half a dozen oxen to draw it.

They eventually set out on the return journey: a noisy caravan of bulls and the pick of the cows that had been left in the Valley, a loaded, lurching dray drawn by wide-eyed, protesting oxen, the burdened packhorses, followed by Birrong and her children and the Murrumbidgee natives eager to be home again—and Mark.

He made the trip on a last-minute decision, leaving Wilson in charge of the Valley. Although the

season was good, the additional cattle had proved too great a strain on the pastures, and as there was every indication of regular consignments every year, the Valley could now be regarded only as a depot. He would have to move his sheep out sooner than he anticipated.

Another reason for accompanying the caravan, although he would never have admitted it, was the strong attachment that had sprung up between him and Birrong's children. Ann, the eldest, was the first to make friends with her big, tongue-tied uncle; she had taken him literally by assault, and thereafter she pursued him shamelessly. She was a replica of her father at the same age, and her great joy was to accompany Mark when the sheep were yarded. She would single out a big, strong animal, and, without warning, would vault on to its woolly back, shrieking with laughter as it careered wildly through the mob with her perched on top. At first, Mark's heart was in his throat lest the child be thrown and trampled beneath the sharp, hard hoofs, but she was a born rider, and her daring fearlessness won her uncle's heart for all time.

Mark could never be persuaded to hold or even to touch the youngest child. But the other two soon followed Ann's example and submitted their uncle to endless indignities which he enjoyed as much as they. John, aged five, was a mischievous, brown-eyed urchin, and Kareela, a year younger, was a fat little golden-skinned imp whose joy was to ride on her uncle's shoulder with her chubby fists clutching his long hair. They were all greatly intrigued with his beard. Their father and all the natives had black beards, but this luxuriant yellow beard and their

uncle's blue eyes were things to wonder at and to be discussed at leisure among themselves.

And Mark, who never yet felt quite at ease with Birrong, worshipped his small grubby nephews and nieces. A hundred times the thought came to him with recurring intensity—if only he were married and owned these children! So on the journey, he seldom rode alone; one or other of the children was invariably perched in front of him. One day as he rode with his brother beside the dray, Jack turned banteringly to him.

"If you don't get some children of your own I'll have to send you some of mine!"

Mark seemed in no way disconcerted at the prospect.

"Well, you've got plenty. Five in eight years."

"Six." The smile left Jack's face for a moment. "One . . . finish."

"Bad luck!" Mark's voice was gruffer than usual.

They rode in silence for a while, looking straight ahead over their horses' ears, then Jack spoke quietly.

"Mebbe it was a good thing." Mark glanced sharply at him. The younger man's eyes were still fixed on the horizon and his words came slowly. "The Old Man reckoned there'd be trouble . . . an' he was right. I thought he was talkin' about cattle at the time, but I know better now. 'The old black strain'll always come out!' he said."

"You mean . . . the one that died?"

Jack nodded heavily.

"If he had lived, he would have been black—like Birrong's father."

A month later, Mark returned alone to the Valley, his horses weary and footsore. He was overflowing

with enthusiasm for the fine country bordering the Murrumbidgee, and his future plans were no longer in doubt. He had found no secluded valleys where shepherding could be dispensed with; he would have to engage labour; but the prospective improvement that the new country would effect on his sheep made him anxious to set out without delay.

Next day he rode to Parramatta and found Brady in the house he had built as combination business premises and home. He still owned the inn at Sydney, but his old age was demanding a little more peace and rest from the hurly-burly of life than the lively atmosphere of the grog shop afforded. There was a twinkle in Brady's eye, in fact he seemed to be in a perpetual chuckle over some private joke. He greeted Mark boisterously, demanded the news of Birrong and her family, and gave his visitor no opportunity of broaching the business that had brought him to town.

"I've a great bit av news for yez," he said at last. "A ship came in last week wid an intoirely new sorrt av merino. They belong to owld Riley av Raby an' folks tell me they'll knock Macarthur's sheep into a cocked hat. But wait a minute—I was forgittin'. There's somebody here that come out on the ship wid 'em that'll tell ye all about 'em." He rose with a look of conspiratorial glee and threw open the door connecting the office with the living quarters. Mark's eyes, alight with interest at the news of the sheep, barely noticed him till Brady's voice announced dramatically, "'Tis himsilf, Mistress Wilson, an' it won't be long now afore ye're wid yer husband agin!"

Mark started to his feet as the quietly dressed woman entered the room, threw him a little curtsy,

then hesitated at sight of the big uncouth young man with the yellow beard, clad in worn blue dungarees, stiff with horse sweat, and the frayed ends of the trousers ending well above his bootless feet. Her surprise was only momentary, but Mark stood petrified.

"I'm verra, verra thankful to ye, Mister Sim, for a' your guidness to James an' to me, an' may the Lord bless ye for it! Tell me . . . Is James weel? Ye see, it'll be five year come Michaelmas since they took him awa' from me. It's been a long, long time, Mister Sim."

Mark nodded hastily.

"He's all right, Mrs Wilson. You'll be seeing him soon . . . in a day or two."

"Thank ye kindly, sir! I've got the dogs James tell't me to bring—a pair o' Border collies—an' ye'll be pleased to hear there's five mair than we started wi'. Five o' the brawest wee puppies ye ever saw."

Mark managed to stammer, "All right, Mrs Wilson," and started to back out of the room. "I'll send Wilson in to bring you out. Maybe Brady can find a cart of sorts." He threw an agonized look at Brady, but the old man at the doorway paid not the slightest attention; his broad grin was, if anything, broader than ever.

Mrs Wilson eyed Mark a trifle hesitantly.

"There's something I have to tell ye that may be a bit o' a surprise—so Mister Brady tells me!" She turned to the doorway and called "Marion!" Then addressing herself to Mark she continued: "My girl wouldna stop at hame withoot her mither. But I want to tell ye, Mister Sim, that she hasna cost ye a penny an' never will if we can help it. We got the money for her passage among oorsels." She

turned to present the girl in the doorway. "Marion, this is Mister Sim that ye've heard tell o'."

If Mrs Wilson's arrival had come as a surprise to Mark, an earthquake could not have disconcerted him more than the appearance of her comely daughter. She stood in the doorway, a slimmer replica of her mother, with even rosier cheeks. She wore a voluminous grey skirt that swept the floor, a tight bodice of the same material that showed her trim figure to advantage, with a soft grey shawl thrown over her shoulders. Her fair hair was drawn back from her forehead and her grey eyes stared blankly at the uncouth figure of the owner of flocks and herds. This time the surprise was common to both parties. At her mother's admonishing "Marion!" she recovered sufficiently to bob a quick curtsy, then backed into the room behind her, out of view.

Brady came to the rescue and led the flabbergasted Mark to the yard. His banter fell on deaf ears, but as Mark swung himself to the horse's back he said curtly:

"I'll send Wilson in for them."

The girl, peering from the small window, saw the horse, galvanized to sudden action, shoot from the yard at a hand gallop. As the echo of the drumming hoof-beats died away she rose slowly to her feet and her thoughts found expression.

"Well . . . I . . . never!"

CHAPTER XVII

FOR days Mark roamed the Valley in the grip of a restlessness that would not let him settle down to work and left him disgruntled and dejected. His beneficence in bringing Wilson's wife out to join him had, by its complications, resulted in routing his plans for the future, or that is how it appeared to him. He had grown to depend on Wilson; he knew he could not take his sheep to the new country single-handed, or even with such labour as could be picked up, unless his right-hand man were there to help and supervise. Wilson was an integral part of his plans, and now Wilson was automatically disqualified from participating in the new adventure by reason of his womenfolk.

Brady, in person, saw to the safe transport of the two women to the Valley, and he met the full blast of Mark's wrath. For a few moments he was too staggered by its unexpectedness to reply. He had never seen Mark so worked up. But as soon as he found his tongue again he rounded on the younger man to some purpose.

"Sure, ye don't know whin ye're well off! That girl had half the bucks av Sydney at her feet. She cud ha' took her pick av the best av 'em, an' here's yersilf stormin' an' frettin' at the prospec' av her company. Save me sowl! If I was t'irty year younger I'd save ye all the trouble ye're makin' an' thry me luck wid 'er mesilf."

Mark's eyes flashed angrily.

"If she had all these men trailin' after her in town, are they goin' to leave her alone here? They'll

be nosin' their way out here to the Valley after her. And how am I goin' to get away to the new country with a lot of women that'll need more lookin' after than all the sheep!"

"Have ye asked 'em to go?" Brady challenged.

"No, and I'm not going to. They haven't been in the country long enough to know what's in front of them. How are they goin' to travel in those skirts? D'you think *I'm* goin' to drive a gig through the gullies and timber and rocks from here to the Murrumbidgee!"

"Listen a minnit!" Brady's features were unusually stern as he tapped the other on the shoulder. "How did yer own mother, rest her sowl, git roun' the country? Didn't she wear skirts at all?"

"She was different."

"Then wait till ye know something about wimmen afore ye git rampin' roun' anny more!" With that he turned on his heel and disappeared round the corner of the stockyard in the direction of the hut.

Mark wheeled at a sound behind him and looked straight into the flashing grey eyes of Marion Wilson. Her lips were a firm, straight line, and angry defiance was in every line of her body.

"I came across to thank you, Mister Sim, but from what I've just heard, I'll do no such thing! I'm verra sorry you think we're so much trouble to you. Maybe we know nothing about the country. But there's one thing I am sure of—you *know nothing of us!* I don't know much about riding horses, but I can learn. . . . An' if it comes to the worst, I can walk—faster than any sheep."

She turned with a quick flirt of her skirts and left Mark staring speechlessly at the back of a

disappearing sun-bonnet perched above a pair of straight, determined shoulders.

Well, that looked like the end of things. If the girl went back, her mother would follow; and even if Wilson remained he would be fretting all the time and his work would never be the same. Mark cursed heartily into his beard. As though a man had not his share of trouble with droughts and floods and bushrangers to contend with. He could understand these things, but women were the complete enigma: he was a soft-headed fool ever to suggest bringing out Wilson's wife.

However, it was no use whining about what had happened; for the future he intended to keep out of the way of the women—particularly that girl with the caustic tongue. Still, he had to concede a grudging admiration for her. The girl had spirit; there was something refreshing and invigorating about the way she looked you straight in the eyes when she spoke—even though her words did leave the hearer gasping. Nevertheless, Mark could not face the thought of meeting that wild cat for a day or two at least. He would return to Parramatta with Brady; after all, he did want to see those new Saxon merinos of Riley's.

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at Raby, Brady driving his gig with a weary horse between the shafts, and Mark astride his best horse. The country had been cleared of timber in the neighbourhood of Riley's home, and the low, rolling hills were clothed in green. The owner appeared from the low-roofed house at their approach and eyed them with suspicion until recognition of Brady allayed his hostility. He abandoned his proximity

to the loaded gun in the porch, but still kept a wary eye on Mark.

"Good day to ye, Misther Riley!"

"Good day, Brady. What brings you out here?"

Brady descended stiffly from the gig and a convict servant came forward to take the horse's head.

"I've bin out havin' a bit av a look at the counthry, an' afther hearin' so much about thim new sheep av yours, I thought I'd make so bold as to have a look at 'em in passin', if it's no throuble to yer Anner?"

"Not at all, Brady. Come down to the sheep-yard. They haven't recovered from the sea voyage yet, but they're picking up marvellously well." Riley unbuttoned his brown cloth coat and led the way down the gentle slope toward the creek while a couple of servants ran ahead to round up the sheep. Mark followed quietly in the rear.

A little group of rams with honey-coloured spiral horns looked up at their approach, then went on cropping the short green grass. Mark paid little attention to the conversation of the other two. His eyes were on the sheep, running rapidly over their shapes, comparing their size with his own rams, and all the time his fingers itched to handle the short fleeces with the black beady tip, to open up the wool and learn the reason for their superiority.

"There you are, Brady!" The landowner's flowered waistcoat swelled with the pride that made a strut of his walk. He waved an expansive hand in the direction of the animals. "The first Saxon sheep in the colony! I can no longer say the only ones. I suppose you have heard of the great ship-load of sheep and cattle and horses that the new Australian Agricultural Company has sent out?"

Brady looked up quickly.

"I did hear somethin', but I haven't seen 'em yet. They tell me this noo company's got a tremenjuss grant av land?"

"A million acres! But where they are going to find so much good land, I don't know."

"It's a big place, the colony."

"Certainly, but . . . what's that man doing?"

Brady followed the indignant glance to see Mark in the midst of the sheep, bending over one which he held lightly by one hand placed under its neck while the other hand ran smoothly over its fleece, parting it here and there with his fingers and peering intently into the pure white wool.

"He's got some sheep av his own, yer Anner," Brady interposed hastily.

"So it would appear!" Riley's indignation had given way to a keen scrutiny of the powerfully built man in dungarees, and presently he walked briskly forward. At his approach the sheep that had taken no exception to Mark's presence, broke up and scattered.

"Well, my man. You seem to be interested in my sheep. What do you think of them?"

Mark looked speculatively at the animals grazing a little distance away.

"They're different . . . !"

Riley snorted. "I should say they are! Hey, there!" He beckoned a retainer. "Bring those sheep here."

They caught the biggest ram and, with a servant holding its curling horns, he stood back and surveyed it, then fired a sudden question at Mark. "Where did you learn about wool?"

Mark, taken aback for the moment, glanced at Brady, then back at his questioner.

"Mr Wood that was the first wool-classer showed me a bit," he replied slowly. "Then Mr Dowling that does Captain Macarthur's wool learned me some more."

"Then how do these compare with Captain Macarthur's?"

"They're not so fine in the wool . . . and the wool's shorter."

Riley nodded impatiently.

"Maybe. But look at this!" He ran his palms over the ram's back and flanks, gripping great handfuls of wool here and there. "Feel that, man! Does Macarthur's wool fill the hands like that?"

Mark followed his actions and marvelled at the bulky feel of the dense, short wool.

"I would like to see them next year. They'll get finer like all the sheep out here."

"They will. But that's not the point! These sheep have something that no other sheep possess. Look how thick the wool grows on the skin! They grow four strands of wool where Macarthur's grow one. His sheep are the Spanish merinos, but nowadays it's the Saxon wool that brings the best price."

Mark turned thoughtfully.

"Will you sell me two of these sheep?"

Riley's eyes bulged as though a bee had stung him and he stared at the serious looking man in faded dungarees.

"Sell them! Do you know what they cost me, man?" he spluttered. "What would you do with sheep like these? . . . And how do you think you would pay for them?"

"I'll guarantee him, yer Anner!" said Brady.

Riley's eyes glanced curiously from one to the other, then he turned back toward the house.

"These sheep are not for sale," he said firmly. "But next year I may have one or two lambs to sell—at a price. Come and see me then!"

On the way back to the house he waxed voluble on his land, its marvellous fertility, and the advantage gained by cutting down the native trees. He fumbled in a capacious pocket and produced a piece of paper which he held toward Brady. "Here, read this! This is something that every one ought to know."

Brady looked at the printed paper with his head on one side, like a crow looking down the neck of an empty bottle; he could not read, but did not want to give himself away.

"Wud ye moind readin' it out, yer Anner? Me owld eyes ain't what they used to be."

Riley grunted and opened the sheet.

"Nor mine either, Brady. But here . . . I know it already." He held the tract close before his eyes and recited laboriously:

"There is no Eden in Nature; all is from the industry of man. We must do what all nations have done before us—collect from every quarter what is adapted to our soil and climate. We must new clothe our adopted country; we must hew down the useless gum-trees and plant the more useful fruit-trees of Europe, and in lieu of the present thin herbage, give to our meadows the rich pastures of Britain."

He coughed importantly and replaced the paper in his pocket.

"If we follow that advice instead of eating the heart out of our pastures and putting nothing back as they're all doing now, we'll be much better off. Well, a safe journey, Brady. And to you, sir." He

stood with his legs apart and one hand on his hip, eyeing Mark's horse. "That's a fine animal you've got there, my man. Will you sell him?"

Mark shook his head slowly but very decidedly, then the gleam of an afterthought crept into his blue eyes.

"How many lambs from your new sheep would you give for him?"

Riley started. Then pursing his lips, looked keenly up at the horseman with a twinkle lighting his eyes.

"Ride him back this way next year and ask me that question again. Good day to you!"

Driving back along the track to Parramatta, Brady chuckled hugely.

"Man! but that was foine. We'll make a dayler out av ye yet."

Next day, Parramatta came to life with the news that the great shipment of pedigreed stock of the Australian Agricultural Company was on its way there to recover from the long voyage. Brady, who had retired to his bed with the intention of staying there for a couple of days to get over the effects of his rough trip, was galvanized to new and greater energy. By the time his gig arrived at Retreat Farm the horses and cattle were already grazing on the fresh green grass, the first they had encountered after months on board ship. The sleek-coated thoroughbreds moved eagerly about the small paddock, nibbling greedily at the sweet grass and cavorting with little side kicks and squeals of joy at finding themselves free and on terra firma again.

There were low, shaggy-coated cattle with long, wide horns—Kylies, according to Brady. But it was the magnificence of the Durhams that took

Mark's eye. Two bulls there were in particular, great massive roan animals with broad backs and deep briskets, and he sighed with pleasure as he remarked to Brady: "I wish Jack could see them!"

Brady allowed a knowing grin to spread over one side of his face. "For the sake av the Orstralian Agriculcheral Comp'ny I hope he don't! But whist. . . . Wait a whoile till I come back."

Brady wandered across to intercept the two strangers and made himself known to Mr Dawson, the Company's manager, and his nephew. Within a few minutes, the astute old Irishman sensed trouble in the camp; they plied him with questions about the country and the routes and seemed to be further taken aback by his replies.

"How far is it to Port Stephens, Mr Brady?" the elder asked.

Brady scratched the back of his head and his quizzical grin deepened.

"Sure it depinds, Misther Dawson. They say it's more'n a hunder moile up the coast."

"And how far by land?"

"Be lan'?" Brady stared aghast. "Ye don't tell me ye're goin' to take your stock up *be lan'?*"

"Certainly! Mr Bowman, one of our local directors, insists that we do."

Brady shook his head sadly.

"Well, wid all respec' to Misther Bowman, there's two things 'e don't know nothin' about. Wan av thim's cattle, an' t'other's the counthry that lies between here an' Port Stephens!"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, for wan thing it's so mountainious that whin the road's not goin' up it's comin' down; an' the trees are as close as the hairs av yer head, an'

there's rocks an' dhrops where the kylics born in the counthry fall over an' break their necks. But thim big bulls'll niver do that."

"What makes you think so, Mr Brady?"

"Bekase it's so shtape and rough they'd niver git up far enough to fall down!"

The elder man stared hard at him for a minute, then he thrust out an impulsive hand. "I thank you for your information, Mr Brady. Some day I hope I may be of service to you."

Mark was nowhere to be seen, but an approaching cloud of dust from which emanated a loud, sustained chorus of bleating offered a likely clue to his whereabouts. The sheep straggled hungrily along the dusty track, the stronger animals in the lead running eagerly from one tussock to the next, but the majority were barely able to stagger along in their wake. Some were lame and all were weak and dispirited, and the undernourished lambs, plodding along with drooping ears and hollow flanks, were ready to drop at the foot of every tree.

Brady caught sight of Mark at the rear of the flock, moving the stragglers quietly along, in contrast to the Company's shepherds who ran up and down brandishing boughs and filling the hot, dusty air with their shouting. Mark was carrying four of the smallest, weakest lambs in his arms and, just as Brady drew near, a tall, black-bearded fellow rushed up to Mark brandishing a long crook. "Awa' wi' ye!" he shouted hoarsely, dancing in front of the astonished Mark and swinging his stick threateningly. "Put doon they lambs an' awa' wi' ye! We'll ha' nae thievin' wastrels here!"

Mark lowered the despondent lambs to the ground and checked the hot surge of rage that threatened

to swamp his self-control. The black-bearded one, mistaking his action for abject surrender, shook his crook in Mark's face and turned a torrent of foul abuse on him. Brady instinctively retreated a few paces as Mark's hand shot out and wrenched the stick from the man; he snapped it in two between his hands, threw the pieces behind him, and advanced on Blackbeard. The foreman backed away, his eyes widening in alarm, but his retreat came to a sudden end as his heel caught on a projecting root and he fell on his stern in the dust. A howl of delight went up from the shepherds who had abandoned the sheep to watch the fun. Apparently, Blackbeard was no favourite.

Brady plucked Mark by the arm, and after one significant look at the man on the ground, he turned and followed the old man. He hardly listened to Brady dilating on the crazy project of sending the stock overland to Port Stephens. His anger ebbed slowly, but a dull resentment against the black-bearded sheep overseer remained. Half of his mind was listening to Brady and the other half was still licking the wounds of his injured pride when an illuminating idea linked the two.

"They're mad to sind thim foine bastes be that rough track!" Brady was saying. "What do *ye* think av it, annyway?"

Mark's gaze never left its casual inspection of the roofs of the township, but his words held a deliberate inflexion.

"You're right, Brady. *A lot of them'll never reach Port Stephens!*"

Brady peered sharply at him, then the myriad wrinkles of his face crinkled with mirth as he cackled joyously:

"Man, it does me a power av good to hear ye talk loike that. Ye're John Sim all over agin!"

All unknown to Mr Bowman and the rest of the local committee, Mr Dawson smuggled his great Durham cattle on board ship again before he set sail for Port Stephens. Three months later, his nephew arrived with the stock that survived the passage of the rough, barren hills. They were in low condition and many cattle and sheep had perished on the way. The marauding dingoes were blamed for the mysterious disappearance of several sheep.

But no one, least of all the black-bearded overseer, ever caught a glimpse of the man that hung on their tracks like a wraith in the timber. And so it came about that close on a dozen of the Australian Agricultural Company's finest Saxon lambs never reached the sour, unsuitable lands around Port Stephens but found their way to the paddock at the top end of the Hidden Valley.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE second draft of bullocks from the Murrumbidgee arrived at the Valley at the height of the boom. The new Australian Agricultural Company, stocking its million acres with the urge of eager capital, was buying sheep and cattle on every hand, and individual settlers who had to compete against the resources of the powerful company were forced to pay four and five guineas for merino sheep and fabulous prices for breeding cattle.

Jack arrived at the Valley in advance of the cattle, announcing himself with a cannonade of sharp cracks from the long stockwhip that swung fluently overhead as he cantered across the clearing to the homestead. Mark walked out to meet him with the dogs skirmishing in front, but the women-folk gathered cautiously round Wilson, their latent fear of the wild looking horseman gradually thawing under Wilson's assurances. Jack wore a pair of kangaroo-skin trousers laced picturesquely down the leg seams with a thong of the same leather; he was bare from the waist up, and his lithe, bronzed body had the bloom of perfect health.

He reined his horse and vaulted to the ground in front of Mark before it reached a standstill. One hand gripped Mark's great shoulder affectionately and the brothers laughed with a bubbling under-current of content as they took stock of each other.

"All right?" was Jack's first question, his keen eyes encircling the Valley, the huts and the latest improvements.

Mark nodded cheerfully.

"Birrong coming?"

Jack pointed back over his shoulder.

"With the cattle." Then added brightly: "She's got 'nother piccaninny." As they walked toward the huts his eyebrows lifted: "You got a woman?"

Mark shook his head vehemently.

"Not me! That's Wilson's wife and girl."

Jack's eyes took in the little group at the corner of the veranda and the old mischievous gleam of boyhood sparkled afresh. "She's all right, Mark." From the powerful figure at his side he glanced again over the trim lines of Marion. "My word!" he said, "that one'd give you fine piccaninnies!"

Mark snorted and hastily changed the subject.

"How many cattle have you this time?"

"More'n last time." He turned from an inspection of the lively sheep-dogs dashing between them and the homestead. "Where'd you get them dingoes?"

"Sheep-dogs!" Mark corrected. At his low whistle, one of them paused tense and expectant, one ear cocked and its brown eyes eagerly watching. Mark whistled again and pointed with one hand to the little flock of sheep stringing out from the creek. The dog shot toward them like an arrow released from a bowstring; he circled the leaders, rounded the sheep into a compact mob and brought them up at a steady pace, weaving back and forward behind them. Another whistle, curt and commanding, and the dog abandoned the sheep and trotted obediently back to his master.

Jack leaned down and fondled the dog's soft ears; his voice rang with enthusiasm.

"My word! I must get a dog to bring the cattle for me. Then I can lie under a tree all day and get fat!"

His cheerful, infectious laugh brought a smile to the lips of the girl on the veranda. Marion had been only vaguely conscious of her father's remarks while Mark and the stranger made their way toward them. Since Brady had brought them to the Valley, there had been no visitors; only the blacks down by the creek, her parents and Mark. She was beginning to despair of Mark; admittedly, she had not minced her words on the day of her arrival, but that was no reason why any man should consistently avoid her for months afterwards. She had spoken just as heatedly to other men and for less cause, yet the affair was soon forgotten.

Marion and her mother had heard every item of information about the visitor that Wilson's memory was capable of retailing. She had formed a mental picture of Jack, of his wife who was neither a white woman nor yet a black, and who went about dressed like Eve. Marion hoped the woman was coming this trip. She desperately wanted to talk to someone new and she was looking forward to seeing the children. It would be heavenly to have a baby to amuse herself with; to fill the long hours of loneliness that grew daily more unbearable.

Jack threw the women a friendly smile as he passed, leading his sweat-streaked horse to the creek. Marion met his frank glance with half-veiled eyes; she was rather shocked at the semi-nudity of the visitor, yet her eyes would insist on straying back in admiration of his splendid physique. He was not nearly so broad and muscular as Mark, but he rode and walked with a lithe grace and poise that his elder brother lacked: he was the race-horse and Mark the plodding draught-horse—while

there was about Jack a spirit of adventure, of the joy of living, that made her sigh.

That evening as the long slanting beams of the sun crept up the rock walls and left the Valley in a lingering half-light, the herd poured down through the gap. Marion stood out on the short cropped grass beyond the buildings watching the thirsty animals streaming down to the creek, the leaders lowing in anticipation of the long, cool drink awaiting them. There seemed to be no end to the long line of reds and roans with the dust hovering over them in a dense haze and the sheep scattering before them.

Then a band of horses and riders detached themselves from the dust-cloud and headed for the hut. In the gathering twilight she picked out Birrong sitting her horse as though she were part of it, with a diminutive figure in front of her. The children cantered on ahead, calling shrilly to one another, then halting at sight of the strange woman and clustering behind their mother. Mark and Jack, after unharnessing the draught oxen up above to obviate bringing the heavy dray down to the Valley, were cantering swiftly to overtake them and they all arrived together.

There were no formal introductions. Birrong reined her horse in front of Marion with a friendly smile of gleaming teeth and surrendered the baby to the girl's outstretched arms. He was naked as the day he was born and his grimy little fists and face and limbs were soft and sun-browned. After a moment's hesitation he snuggled peacefully in the girl's arms and permitted himself to be carried into the kitchen and proudly exhibited to the older woman.

Outside all was noise and bustle and confusion, men and children letting their horses go and shrilling instructions to the native stockmen. Then they all settled down to supper round the big fire in front of Mark's hut. To her amazement, neither Birrong nor Jack could be persuaded to enter the old hut. To them, as to Mark, it would remain for ever associated with 'the tragic scenes that had been enacted there. Marion flew around among the visitors, excited and happy, carrying out huge dishes of smoking chops and high-piled slices of damper that melted away before the onslaught of Birrong's hungry family.

When at last she retired to her bed, she lay for a time with a contented smile on her lips. She would have liked to have had that darling brown baby nestling at her side, but she regretfully had to leave it slumbering peacefully on a sheep-skin on the ground with a thin grey blanket thrown over it. But most important of all was the new light in which she had seen Mark. Since the arrival of Ann, now a mischievous slip of a girl of ten, Mark had been subjected to a gay despotism, and he had bowed to it with seeming enjoyment, accepting all kinds of youthful indignities at the hands of the youngsters. Why couldn't Mark act naturally in *her* presence instead of spending his life avoiding her?

From that time, a new note seemed to pervade the Valley. The long, leisurely days of peace and solitude were at an end, and behind the bustle and confusion was an unmistakable feeling that changes were at hand. The three men conferred together in the evenings, Mark and Jack squatting on their heels in the native fashion that Wilson found im-

possible to copy. His leg muscles and calves bulged in the wrong places, and his knee-joints were too stiff to allow the upper and lower leg to fit closely together.

Indecision was at an end. The Valley was to be vacated. Only the details of the move had to be considered and worked out. Drafts of bullocks were driven off to Parramatta, and the packhorses returned laden with goods and supplies. Mark and Jack returned in triumph from one trip with a new dray, and they spent days thereafter breaking in a fresh team of young bullocks to draw it on the hazardous trip to the Murrumbidgee.

Brady drove out to the Valley in his gig, and Marion was struck with the change in the old man. He looked shrunken and frail, but the old fire burned in him as brightly as ever and he waved his whip gaily at the two women waiting to welcome him.

"Faith an' it's worth comin' out here jist for a sight av your pretty faces!"

He clambered stiffly down from the gig and dragged a bulky object from the back of it which he plumped at Marion's feet. "There ye are, me dear, it's a man's saddle: divil a lady's wan cud I foind. Annyway, to my moind, it's a more nacheral way av sittin' on a horse than drapin' yersilf on wan soide av it."

The girl's shining eyes lifted from the gift to the weather-beaten face of the old Irishman, then impulsively she threw her arms round his neck and kissed the lined cheeks.

"Mister Brady, ye're a darling."

The old man nodded happily at the back of the departing girl. Then he looked at Mark lifting a

heavy sack off a packhorse with no apparent effort.

"Man alive!" he muttered. "To think that there sh'uld be sich fools in the worrld!"

Brady spent several days in the Valley. There were long conferences between the men, and the air simmered with the hint of momentous changes. Stock prices were booming to such an extent that the old man was of the opinion that they could not last. He advised the brothers to sell all the stock they could get cash for.

"I can git ye better prices now than they're worth. Even if prices go up higher it's on'y mad-men that'd pay 'em. An' if they dhrop, as I think they will, ye'll buy your kylied back at half the price ye got for 'em."

The Australian Agricultural Company was still buying, and every ship brought out new bulls and horses and Saxon sheep. Jack listened with interest to the old man's version of the rumour of friction between the manager of the Company and the Sydney directors, and a crafty smile lit his eyes. A plan was dawning in his mind—a scheme that might have emanated from his gipsy father—and the more he thought it over, the more it appealed to him. Life had been hard but straightforward for a long time. He suddenly felt that his inherent gifts had been stagnating and that it was time to introduce a little spice into life. He rose and stretched himself before the fire, then turned casually to Brady.

"I go back to the Murrumbidgee to-morrow!"

Mark eyed his brother steadily, wondering what hidden move Jack had in mind.

"I'll take the rest of the bullocks in for you," he offered.

Jack nodded his thanks and stood over Brady again.

"Can you sell all my cattle?" he demanded. The old man looked up sharply.

"D'ye mane it? All av 'em?"

The dark head nodded calmly.

"I might keep the best young cows." Then he strolled lightly away to break the news to Birrong and to stir up his blacks for an early start.

Brady's eyes gleamed as brightly as the glowing coals of the fire; his mind was already at work disposing of the cattle. A few here, a few there, a big draft for the Australian Agricultural Company—and there would surely be another ship in soon carrying settlers with more money than knowledge of local conditions.

His head jerked sideways till his eyes rested on Mark. The latter's features plainly betrayed his concern at Jack's decision. Supposing the cattle did realize a lot of money, what was the use of it? It was all right to have enough to buy necessities and a few useless pretty things in the Sydney shops, but on the Murrumbidgee a handful of money was of less use than a handful of chips. Then it began to dawn on him that some deep-laid scheme lay behind his brother's apparent impetuosity and the thought, and its probable consequences, were even more disturbing. He shifted restlessly and became aware of Brady's scrutiny.

"Goin' to sell yourr sheep, Mark?"

"I'll have to sell some; there are too many for Wilson and me to tend, and we can't get enough help. We're goin' to start shearin' now so I'll pick out the worst of the sheep and bring them in to you. Then we'll go."

Brady regarded him intently.

"Have ye told the wimmen-folk?"

"They know—Wilson told them."

"Why don't ye act loike a man? . . . An' her the foine girrl she is."

Mark continued to stare steadily into the glowing heart of the fire without replying.

"It ain't nacheral. . . . An' it ain't fair to her! If she had bin a man ye'd ha' talked wid her, w'uldn't ye?"

Beyond a tightening of his half-hidden features, Mark appeared not to hear, but the incisive brogue went remorselessly on.

"A man w'uldn't put up wid the way ye trate her. Are ye goin' to kape it up in the new counthry an' lave her to talk wid on'y the nakid savages? . . . Hey? If that's so, ye'd better let her come back to Sydney wid owld Brady. She'll have ivery man in the colony at her feet inside av foive minits, an' the pick av the Pure Merinos for a husban'."

Mark stiffened and for a moment sat rigid and motionless. Then he rose suddenly to his feet and stood over Brady, his features working but his tongue unable to frame the thoughts that churned within him. Then with a quick turn he wrenched himself away and strode swiftly into the night. Brady's lined face developed a myriad network of wrinkles converging on the bright old eyes that watched the broad shoulders merge into the shadows and disappear.

Mark walked blindly, his thoughts in a whirl. He had been forced to seek the sanctuary of the darkness because Brady had put into words the fear that had tormented him for months. It had always been there—that swiftly repressed dread of the day that

Marion would leave the Valley. He had no fear of an intruder abducting the girl. He would have welcomed such an opportunity to break down the wall that had risen between them by a show of action.

Marion was terribly lonely. Even he could see that, although he was incapable of understanding all the causes contributing to it. Mark, to whom the Valley was home, could not see that to the girl everything here was strange and alien—the trees, the grass, the birds, the animals. The awful silence, the barren solitude, that invested this new world was a disquieting force that sapped the source of laughter and cheerfulness. Her friends and companions had been left behind in another world; she was alone at an age when companionship and laughter are everything.

And now Brady had put his finger unerringly on the vulnerable spot in Mark's armour. The furtive pin-point of fear had suddenly assumed gigantic proportions, blotting out all thoughts and plans of the move to the new country, of everything pertaining to the future. Now, beyond repression, the smouldering spark had burst into a fierce conflagration that appalled him by its urgency and by the tenacious hold it had taken on his life. He knew now that everything in his world hinged on it, that all his plans for the future had unconsciously sprung from it, and until the matter was brought to a head and satisfactorily solved, nothing else could matter.

At that moment a shadowy figure loomed up in front of him. He threw up his head and stopped short, face to face with Marion.

CHAPTER XIX

THE girl stared at the great bearded figure that lumbered out of the shadows and halted directly in her path. This was not the distant, silent Mark who consistently avoided her. In the moonlight she caught a glimpse of his features, twisted and tortured by the emotions behind them; and fear, added to the fright caused by his sudden appearance, involuntarily lifted her hand to clutch the shawl tightly at her throat. The half-grown collie that seldom left her heels laid an inquiring nose against her knee and her courage returned.

"What is it? What's wrong?" she demanded.

The man looked blankly at her, trying desperately to control his scattered thoughts, and his lips moved soundlessly. The unexpected meeting here in the moonlight was even more disconcerting to him in his present state of mind. His troubled eyes had a beseeching, doglike appeal and one great hand stretched impulsively toward her.

"Brady . . ." he stammered.

"Is he ill?" she cried quickly, voicing the fears the old man's altered appearance had given rise to.

The shaggy head shook impatiently.

"He said . . . you were going away."

The girl stared uncomprehendingly.

"Away? . . . We're all going away, aren't we . . . to the new country?"

"Then it's all right?" His voice was fierce with anxiety.

"What do you mean? My father and mother are

going. I will go with them unless"—her lip curled sarcastically—"you still think I'm a hindrance."

"No! No!"

She smiled faintly at his vehement protestation, her composure fully recovered.

"I can ride a horse now. I can drive sheep; and Mister Brady has brought me a saddle. Do you think . . ." She broke off undecidedly, still a trifle uneasy under the strange look in his eyes. "Do you think I could ride some other horse than old Tom?"

Fear and suspense were swept from his eyes by a deep surge of relief.

"Take my horse," he offered instantly. "Any horse. Which one do you want?"

Marion gazed in astonishment at the transformed being in front of her. He was actually smiling—at her—and offering her the pick of the horses. The opportunity was too good to miss. "Can I have the pony with the white face and legs?" she asked eagerly. "I could help drive in the sheep for shearing."

Mark threw back his head and laughed happily at the broad white moon. Fear and tension were dispelled. He felt happier than he had ever been. Marion was not leaving him, and the knowledge filled him with a delicious rush of power. His outstretched hand touched her sleeve and a magic fire coursed wildly through his veins. His head swam, his knees trembled, and his arms swept the girl to him.

Marion gasped in the bearlike embrace. She struggled frantically until she freed one arm. Then her body relaxed and her arm slipped round his

neck and drew his head closer to her fervent whisper:

"Oh, Mark . . . Mark!"

The sheep bleated their way up the steep slope leading to the exit from the Valley in the early morning light, a broad white stream enshrouded in a soft dust haze. In the rear, urging on the stragglers, toiled Wilson and old Mike the time-expired lag who constituted the only additional labour procurable. Ship after ship still arrived to land England's unwanted on the shores of Sydney Cove; but so insatiable was the demand for labour that the able-bodied of every miserable shipload were claimed and apportioned for service almost before the anchor chains had ceased to rattle.

Old Mike had worked for Brady and, if age were any criterion, he should have been contemplating retirement from active participation in the world's affairs rather than taking part in the hardships of pioneering. In spite of his years, old Mike's experiences made him worth any two able-bodied newcomers, and he took to shepherding as though he had been at it all his life. The top of his head was bald as an egg, but a fringe of white hair formed a semi halo which was completed by the ragged white beard that stuck out pugnaciously from his sharp old chin.

On the high-timbered upland, the dogs wove a steady pattern round the sheep eager to spread through the fresh pasture, holding the leaders back until the last of the flock surged through the narrow pass. Mark, astride his big bay, divided his attention between the dogs and the cavalcade of horses and cattle, some of them carrying heavy packs and

all restless at the enforced inaction. Farther ahead, the high-piled dray waited with its team of oxen tossing their horns impatiently while the native escort squatted on their heels, their long red spears leaning against a tree.

Waiting behind the loaded dray, Mrs Wilson hid her perturbation in a deep poke bonnet. Of all the party she seemed the least fitted for an expedition into the trackless wild. She tried hard to convince herself that the long journey was merely the means to an end to which she and her husband had jointly aspired. But the fact persisted that she was leaving the rough comfort of what she had accepted as her home, and she felt, particularly at that moment, that she had reached an age that demanded rest and security. She wanted to settle down, to spread her roots out comfortably like an old tree that drowzes in the sunlight and fills its branches with the songs of birds. But her place was with her husband, and her deeply rooted Scottish sense of loyalty and indebtedness linked their fortunes with those of the uncouth, tongue-tied owner of all this gear, sitting there on his horse.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the last sheep trotted through the gap, and her husband and old Mike appeared wiping the perspiration from their brows and set to work to block the entrance again. A boy on a pony cantered through the timber— young John, lent for the occasion by Birrong—and swept after his charges, the straying packhorses and cattle. Still there was no sign of Marion. Mark was whistling the dogs back from the lead of the sheep, and in a moment the dray would be leaving.

Then the girl appeared, her white-stockinged mare threading its way through the trees at a

sedate pace. Marion's face was hidden in the big sun bonnet, but the slight sag of her shoulders was eloquent of the state of her feelings.

"Wherever have ye been, girl?" scolded the elder woman. "Here we're a' waitin' an' never a sign o' ye. What have ye been doin'?"

"I was just having a last look, mother." The girl's voice was quiet and subdued. "What a small place it looks from up here!"

"Big or sma', it was a home; an' I'll be glad to see our next one. This wanderin's no for a wumman o' my age!" She turned as Mark rode round the dray, loosening the long whip. "Are we startin' now, Mister Mark?"

Mark nodded and pointed up to the loaded dray.

"Will you ride on top?"

The buxom woman shook her head emphatically.

"I'll be safer where I am, thank ye! I'll walk a while wi' my man ahin the sheep till they beasts settle doon a bit." She set off in the wake of the flock, an incongruous, determined little figure.

Marion looked across at Mark. The wistfulness of the moment was still in her eyes and her voice. "Do you think we'll ever come back?" she asked.

Her husband's reply was non-committal.

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know. I never realized how much I had got used to it. I just hated it at first. . . . But now that we're leaving I feel like I did when we left home to come out here."

Mark nodded sympathetically.

"I have lived here nearly all my life. . . . But we've got to go on. You'll like the Big River. And . . ." He hesitated, groping for the words and phrases that were still new to his tongue.

Marion smiled into his eyes and moved her pony closer so that their knees touched.

"I know, Mark. It will be *our* home!"

Her husband smiled the contentment that possessed every fibre of him; then as they turned their horses toward the waiting team he shouted to the squatting natives. They jumped to their feet, grabbing at bundles of spears; the long whip in Mark's hand swung incitingly, and the bullocks settled into the collars. Trace chains clashed and drew taut. A gruff command, and the team swung off a shade and straightened up; the wheels of the dray turned with a creak and a lurch, and the last unit of the expedition started for the Murrumbidgee.

CHAPTER XX

THE young man in the plum-coloured swallow-tail coat and nankeen tights looked back from the wharf to the ship lying at anchor in the bay. The boat which had just landed him and his boxes was being pulled lustily back, a fan-shaped wake spreading slowly from her stern; the creak of the oars had not yet merged with the noise and confusion reigning on her decks behind the painted ports. Strange, mused the young man, that after five months of boredom, discomfort and longing to be off that ship, he could still feel a warmth in his heart at the sight of her blunt stem and square set yards.

He turned his back on the ship and bent a critical inspection on the town. This was not the wilderness he had anticipated. There was a homeliness about the whitewashed cottages flanking the streets that straggled up from the Cove and over the hills. On the low summits, windmills perched like watch-towers, their sails turning lazily in the hot sunshine. It *was* hot—particularly so to a gentleman in a tight-fitting cloth coat and breeches. Young Mr Simpson fanned himself with his beaver and glanced superciliously over the ragged yellow-garbed convicts staggering under boxes and casks, and the nondescript groups of bare-footed loungers lazily eyeing the bustle. A few prosperous looking individuals moved briskly through the throng. At last, Mr Simpson singled out a stoutish man who appeared to wield no little authority, as a likely person to answer his inquiries. The portly man in

the snuff-coloured coat returned the young man's elaborate bow and introduction.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir—James Manning, at your service. Pardon me one moment." Mr Manning shouted an order at two perspiring individuals in threadbare cotton clothes, rolling a large barrel in the direction of a bullock dray, then turned again to his questioner.

"If it is lodging you are seeking, sir, there is none better to be found in Sydney than at the Pulteney Hotel. You can see it from where we stand—at the corner of Bent Street. The meeting-place of all the gentlemen of the colony, and owning the finest ball-room in the country. I am going that way myself. In fact, sir, I may add that I am the owner of the Pulteney Hotel. Are these your boxes, sir?" He beckoned with his stout cane at the dungareed labourers. "Bring Mr Simpson's boxes to the hotel at once. And you, Williams, stay here and keep a weather-eye on these casks."

The young man fell into step with Mr Manning and the two threaded their way through the groups of idlers and waiting drays on to the dusty road. Mr Simpson glanced eagerly right and left at the unfamiliar scene. He had not yet lost his sea-legs and was forced to tread carefully to avoid stumbling on the rough, rutted surface of the roadway; but the buildings, the strange medley of people and the mixed smells of the waterfront claimed all his attention.

Mr Manning, on the other hand, to whom none of these sights or sounds or smells were new, occupied himself with a close scrutiny of his companion. By his dress and baggage, Mr Simpson was apparently a youth of substance; his deportment was that of

a gentleman. Still, somehow, Mr Manning had his doubts. He rather prided himself on being a judge of character, and no one in the colony had more opportunity of exercising that gift than Mine Host of the Pulteney Hotel.

On one side of the road, an irregular row of cottages lay behind their paling fences. Each one possessed its garden full of roses and bright coloured flowers, in many cases struggling through a wilderness of rank weeds, and at every doorway hung a cage or two from which bright-hued parrots squawked and screeched. People were coming and going everywhere, their dress plainly denoting their social status. The respectable business men were clad mostly in swallow-tail coats of various colours and tight nankeen trousers; the relative importance of the lower strata of the community could be deduced by their footwear—or lack of it. Apparently, no democrat wore socks, and not over many sported boots.

Mr Manning's expressive cane introduced the newcomer to the social intricacies of the colony.

"In the early days, Mr Simpson, there were only two classes of people—the military and other officials who received grants of land and who were known as"—Mr Manning coughed discreetly—"the Pure Merinos.' The other portion was composed of those who were so unfortunate as to have incurred His Majesty's displeasure—the 'canaries' you see around you." Mr Manning's cane airily indicated a ragged group of convicts trudging barefoot down the road with a blue-coated overseer in their wake.

"Nowadays, things are not so simple. The big land-owners have multiplied—this is a great country, Mr Simpson, and you are fortunate in arriving

at a time when prosperity, with open arms, awaits the young man. Although we still have the two old classes, several others have arisen between. There are the emancipists—men whose terms have expired and who have settled on the land or gone into business—and respectable citizens many of them are. Then there are the dungaree settlers from the Hawkesbury—poor fellows! And now comes a new class—the Cornstalks, the colonial currency—descendants of the old lags. A bad lot! Look at that crowd hanging round the grog shop! Any one of them would cut your throat for the price of a glass of rum. Their looks don't belie them."

Mr Manning's cane indicated a solid stone building on their right. "The Government Stores—built by Governor Macquarie. You will find his name on most of our noteworthy buildings, except the newer ones, of course. A great man, sir! Yes, that is Government House on the other side of the Cove where the flag is flying—Sir Richard Bourke is in residence at the moment."

Mr Simpson paused to stare after a tall bearded passer-by picturesquely attired in blue crimean shirt with high riding-boots and a wide cabbage-tree hat. The heavy leather belt at his waist sagged under the weight of a pistol holster and the long knife sticking out of a sheath at the back. His guide smiled back at Mr Simpson's inquiring look.

"A fellow in from the country, by the look of him! You will notice that most of the town people are clean-shaven, while the bushmen and the station owners wear beards or moustaches." He nodded reassuringly. "You will soon learn to tell a man's profession by his clothes, Mr Simpson. We cross

the stream by this bridge; the Pulteney Hotel is at hand and I trust you will join me in a glass of wine."

That evening after supper, Mr Simpson wandered out on to the hotel balcony overhanging the corner of Bent Street. The evening air was warm in spite of the breeze from the Cove below. On his left, four bearded men dressed in rough coloured shirts and tight trousers talked loudly over generous potations of rum in a language so embellished with outlandish words and phrases that it was practically unintelligible to the newcomer's ears.

They had drunk just enough to bring their grievances to the surface, and they damned in turn and in chorus the iniquitous land laws, the blacks who murdered shepherds and who then had to be shot down in droves. Strange incredible happenings, recounted with a garlanding of oaths while queer-sounding names like Warrah and Goonoo Goonoo rolled glibly from their tongues. They cursed in the same breath scab and catarrh in sheep and the increasing activities of "squatters"—particularly someone by the name of Jack Sim, who had a herd almost as fine as that of the Company and to which, they affirmed darkly, his cattle bore a most suspicious resemblance.

On Mr Simpson's right, a pair of quietly-dressed gentlemen sat over their port. Their amicable conversation failed to reach the newcomer's ears and he was forced to divide his attention between the countrymen and the street scenes in the deepening dusk below. Ladies passed along the rutted street dressed in poke bonnets trimmed with ribbons, and the high-waisted gowns of the mode with high arm-length gloves and spreading skirts that almost concealed the heel-less sandals they wore. They were,

in the main, escorted by gentlemen making play with their canes. Occasionally a couple of females passed arm-in-arm, their dresses cut low to display their charms. The seductive glances aimed at the balcony stirred the interest of Mr Simpson. Five months of shipboard life had left him with more hunger than fastidiousness as far as wenches were concerned.

Someone entered the balcony from the room behind and Mr Simpson turned to see his host ushering in a tall bearded man in high leather boots and the blue shirt and breeches of a countryman.

"Ah, here you are, Mr Simpson. I have the honour to present Mr John Hawdon, who knows the southern part of the colony as well as any man."

The big man extended a hand with a grip that made Mr Simpson wince, then he threw himself into the chair opposite and stretched his legs out in front of him.

"Manning tells me you want to find O'Brien on the Murrumbidgee," he opened in a breezy voice.

"I have a letter of introduction to Mr O'Brien," Simpson stated. "I understand that his farm is some distance from Sydney."

"Most of the new stations are. My own run—Bodalla—is over two hundred miles down the coast. But O'Brien was one of the first to settle on the Murrumbidgee—and a fine station he has selected, down near Mark Sim's. Thirty miles frontage to the river and great sheep country. But it's a long ride from Sydney—over two hundred miles and a hard track to find."

Even in the obscurity of the balcony, Mr Simpson's consternation was plain. "But . . . are there no roads . . . no conveyances?"

"Well, you can get the new coach to Goulburn—that's half-way. But from there . . ." He paused a moment. "I tell you what! My brother Joe and I are pushing out to the south in search of new country within a month or so. We will pass within a few leagues of O'Brien's station, so if you care to come with us . . ."

"I'll be delighted, sir. You have taken a great load off my mind."

The big man held up a deprecating hand.

"We will be glad of your company, but I warn you to be prepared for hardships. You will need to buy a good horse and saddle, and I would advise the purchase of some strong suitable clothing." He broke off and studied the dim outline of the other. "I suppose you intend to take up land for yourself?"

"I do, sir. They say the prospects are wonderful. All London is talking of the fortunes to be made in this country; hundreds of people are rushing to invest money in pastoral enterprises; scores of families are selling their properties and clamouring for passages to New South Wales."

John Hawdon emitted a low whistle of interest.

"Well, there is room for them all. But two things are essential for success—stout hearts and sufficient capital. Sheep and cattle are becoming daily dearer. Settlers are pushing out every day in search of new pastures. Once, they awaited the reports of the explorers; now they are eager to look for themselves. A fever has caught the people—a hunger for land. Their flocks and herds and drays are overrunning the boundaries in all directions. They push out to the farthest settlement, then on into the unknown among savage blacks, across wild uncharted country, most of it dry and desolate, but

always in the hope of finding some place better than the last.

"We are gamblers, Mr Simpson. But many of us, unfitted for the game, do not realize until too late that we are gambling not only with our lives but with the lives of others. For that reason I counsel patience. Henry O'Brien is a fine type of settler. You will profit by your experience with him better than by catching the land fever and probably losing all your capital."

"I am profoundly grateful to you, sir." Mr Simpson's voice was suave, but the somewhat contemptuous curl on his thin lips suggested his impatience of advice. In the darkness of the hotel balcony his features were fortunately obscured.

Mark rode moodily out of the brooding heat of the timber into the scorching glare of the open country. Here was grass in plenty, but it was dry and parched and practically useless as pasture unless he could find water for the sheep within reasonable distance. The six years he had spent on the Murrumbidgee had been full of incident. His flocks had increased, not only in numbers: down here on the rich country the sheep were bigger in frame, stronger and healthier in constitution, and grew longer, heavier fleeces than ever before.

A year or two after his arrival, new settlers began to appear on the river. The land had been taken up on both sides of him and across the river, and an ever-increasing stream of land-seekers, with sheep and cattle and loaded drays, was pressing down the track that was gradually becoming more defined. Some had a little experience of the country. But a new type was mingling with the seasoned pros-

pectors; these were the men attracted by the rumours of the fortunes to be made overnight in the new land—lawyers, business men, men from the cities of distant England, without even the knowledge necessary for elementary stock management in their own country.

They had succumbed to the prevailing land lust on arrival and rashly followed the popular maxim to "put everything they had into four legs." They were faced with the necessity of looking after their stock and of finding land to settle on. Some were fortunate in the overseers they hired; many were not. One family had driven their sheep down the river with a villainous looking ex-convict as guide. Their flock consisted almost entirely of aged wethers and a few nondescript rams; the sheep were in low condition, lame with footrot and afflicted with scab and every other disease that sheep were heir to, yet this was the foundation on which the deluded owner expected to build a fortune.

These fortune-hunters came and passed on, each hard on the heels of the other. Some few straggled back disheartened and broken, the flocks in which they had sunk their capital dead from thirst or poison weed or disease; or scattered by the constant depredations of dingoes and blacks.

The endless traffic of stock along the river left Mark a train of worries. The rich river-flats which could more than carry the burden in good seasons were soon cropped bare when rain failed; the dead and dying cripples and diseased sheep dropped by the travellers spread their diseases among Mark's flock. Scores of his sheep perished from scab; the loathsome disease spread and gave the shepherds no rest.

Now the prolonged drought had added to his worries. The smaller creeks were drying up and the river itself had dropped to a bare trickle. So Mark had set out to explore the back of his run, but so far, the hilly, heavily timbered country had offered nothing to relieve the situation.

Half-way across the clearing, Mark reined his horse sharply and turned at right angles to his course, his eyes searching the ground. Here and there between the bleached tufts of grass, the soil was faintly disturbed. He slipped off his horse and examined the tracks intently, his brow furrowing at the thought of a man—a white man wearing boots—on foot in this country. The tracks told an urgent story to his practised eye. The man who made them was weak, his steps were failing, and he was plainly lost. Mark leaned forward and urged his horse to a canter. Through the timber on the far side of the clearing the failing footsteps wandered in a crazy, purposeless line. The tracks were fresh and the man could not be far ahead, but speed was impossible here.

In the bed of a rocky, steep-walled gully, palpitating with breathless heat, the horse snorted and stopped dead at sight of the body lying on its face with arms outflung. Mark slipped hastily to the ground and turned the man face upwards. He was quite young, of slight build, with fair hair and a week's growth of stubble on his sun-blistered features. His clothes and boots were new, and told the wearer's history at a glance. He still lived, and at Mark's touch he made a faint movement as though to ward off attack. Mark picked up the unconscious figure, slung it over one shoulder and, leading the frightened horse, climbed out of the gully. On level

ground he remounted and the horse set off with its double burden for the nearest shepherd's hut.

For ten long days and nights, Marion and her mother took turns at nursing the unconscious man wavering all the time between life and death. He had momentarily recovered at the first taste of water, but had lapsed again, raving incoherently, into a coma from which it seemed doubtful he would ever return. Work at the homestead was neglected; Marion's youngest child was only a few months old and the routine household duties suffered at the demands made on her. Old Mrs Wilson was tireless as ever in spite of the years of hardship, but the half-dozen men that Mark employed at the homestead had to be fed as well as the family. So there was general relief when at last the patient showed signs of returning life.

One day as Marion was renewing the cold cloths on his forehead, the eyes opened and glimmered blankly at her. From the swollen lips came a hoarse whisper and she bent over him with a wave of thanksgiving sweeping through her.

"You are at Mark Sim's . . . on the Murrumbidgee."

"Not . . . O'Brien's?"

"No. His place is a day's ride away." After a pause she asked again: "Did you come from O'Brien's?"

"No." His eyes seemed to be trying to remember, to be groping haphazardly among memories which had got hopelessly mixed and out of focus. "I came . . . from Sydney . . . with Hawdons."

Marion nodded. "They came through with cattle. Did you get lost?"

"Left them . . . to go . . . O'Brien. Horse tired . . . no water."

"Maybe we could send word to O'Brien?" she suggested. "Were they expecting you?"

"No . . . letter lost. My name . . . Simpson." The eyes closed and the exhaustion of the effort dragged him back to oblivion again.

Before the end of another week, the patient was up and moving feebly about the homestead, but it was some time before he would venture out into the sunlight. Even then he would dart from one patch of shade to the next, still cringing in fear from the direct rays of the sun. In the evening when Mark returned, they would sit outside on the cool southern side of the house and talk in the velvet darkness. Simpson recounted all that had befallen him between his arrival in Sydney and his parting with the Hawdons to ride to O'Brien's. He was also able to give the latest news of Sydney, which Mark and Marion followed eagerly. When his talk veered to London Mark sat silent and uncomprehending; the background of those events he could not hope to visualize.

It was years since Mark had been to Sydney. The last time was when he had taken Marion there to get a parson to marry them. Even yet, he could not for the life of him understand the necessity of the meaningless ceremony. Jack and Birrong had got on all right without it. He was pretty certain that the gipsy and his mother had dispensed with any such formality, and the lack of it had made no difference to them or to any one else. However, Marion had wanted it and that was enough for him.

But Sydney was changing; it was growing fast, and the old order was changing too. The old men—

the men who were the leaders in his young days—were dead and gone. Brady had passed on; so had most of the early settlers. A new generation—the first of the colonial currency—were taking a hand in things and, to a great extent, most of them were no better than their parents had been. Simpson brought the news of the death of Captain John Macarthur. Mark's memories went back to the days when he had envied the proud autocrat his fine sheep, and to his early determination to breed even better sheep himself. Well, he had succeeded. His flocks were far superior to any that had passed along the river. But he felt he must go back and see the newer importations—the Saxon sheep that Cox and Riley, Bettington and Walker were using, and the sheep that Macarthur's sons were breeding now.

Mark had accumulated a store of knowledge that he wanted to discuss and compare with that of other sheepmen. He had watched and noted the effects of the seasons and of different pastures on his sheep and on their wool, and he did not hold with the universal idea that running streams and lush green grass grew the best wool. He preferred the drier inland country, provided there was water enough for the stock. In a dry time, too, the open country succumbed early, but on the lightly timbered lands there was always something to fall back on.

Simpson plied him with questions on pastoral subjects and Mark answered him readily. As soon as Simpson was fit to ride again, Mark provided him with a quiet horse and took him on his daily excursions or sent him on short trips with Wilson. It was early evident that the man could not be

relied on to make even the shortest trip by himself. Once he lost sight of any landmark he was lost. He had no sense of direction whatever. Mark, who had been born with it and whose boyhood training with the blacks had sharpened the faculty to an amazing degree, found it hard to credit that a man who could lose himself so quickly and so often should still be alive to tell the tale.

After he had fully recovered, Simpson showed no inclination to leave or even to notify O'Brien of his existence. Marion liked his presence about the house; he was young and he talked well and talked a lot about things she remembered in the Old Country—things that Mark did not understand. She discovered that one portion of her mind had become starved, almost atrophied, because of that neglect.

Mark began to feel slightly uneasy after a time. Simpson continued to play the role of honoured guest; he never attempted to help with any of the work but would lounge about and talk while the others toiled. He was fastidious to a degree about his food, and the crude table manners of the pioneers disgusted him. But he still kept up his questioning of Mark and Wilson and every man on the place. He absorbed each man's opinions and used them as the basis of an argument with someone else in the hope of eliciting further information. He rode all along the frontage with Mark and the shepherds, from the northern to the southern boundaries, and queried Mark about land laws and suchlike matters on which the latter had not the foggiest opinions.

"I was here first," Mark replied, "and took what I wanted when the Guv-mint didn't even know it existed. The others came after and did the same;

so any others that come this way now have got to go farther on for new land. That's all there is to it!"

Then one evening Simpson announced that he must leave. Could Mark sell him a horse and saddle? He had no money with him, but he would give a bill on his Sydney banker for the amount. Mark let him have the steady old horse he had ridden about the run, for half of its value, but the only spare saddle on the place belonged to Marion. She immediately offered to lend it until Mr Simpson could buy one at O'Brien's or in Sydney, and the offer was accepted with alacrity. Mark sent a man to guide him to O'Brien's, and early one morning Mr Simpson and his escort rode gaily away.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR a few days, Marion missed the easy chatter of her departed guest, but she had work to do and the feeling gradually wore off. Her eldest daughter, Janet, was five years old now—a chubby, flaxen-haired replica of her mother; young Mark was three, and the baby gave her little time to herself these days. Mrs Wilson listened for a while in silence to her regrets for the absent visitor, then delivered herself of *her* opinion in measured tones.

“Ye may be sorry, Marion, but I’m richt glad to see the last o’ him. He was mair trouble than a pack o’ weans an’ wi’ a’ his gran’ airs he never knew how to say ‘Thenk ye’ as if he meant it. I w’uldna trust him as far as I c’uld throw him!”

The autumn shearing was almost over. The last flock of sheep had been through the Washpool, now no deeper than a man’s waist in any part, and the semicircle of shepherds and itinerant shearers stooping over the struggling animals under the open shed roofed with thick layers of boughs, was not at all sorry to see the numbers of woolly sheep decreasing in the catching-pens. As each shorn sheep was released—snow-white and incredibly skinny on its thin shanks—the shearer would straighten his back painfully and cast an eye over the woolly sheep waiting in the pens to try and pick the easiest one. Occasionally a respite could be gained by a critical inspection of the shears or the application of a sharpening stone to the blades.

Mark classed all the fleeces himself. After spreading the fleece out on a rough table he would tear off

any stained pieces or patches with grass-seeds adhering; then pull out a lock of wool and peer carefully at it before rolling the fleece into a snowy-white ball. Most of the landowners packed their fleeces spread flat on top of one another, but Mark followed his own ideas on the subject. Behind him was a row of bins piled high with fleeces, each bin taking wool of a certain length of staple and fineness.

When a bin became too full of the snowy contents, a long canvas envelope was hung from the branches of an overhanging gum and the fleeces pitched in one at a time while one of the men climbed into the pack, tramped them firmly and rammed them into the corners and down the sides with a spade. When the long pack was full and overflowing, a square piece of canvas was sewn tightly across the mouth. This was Wilson's job; he was also responsible for marking on the bales with a short piece of wood dipped in tar Mark's distinguishing brand, and the consecutive number of the bale. If it contained his best fleeces it was marked with an A followed by a small a, following the practice Macarthur had set to denote the contents of his bales.

The rush of new settlers had placed labour at a premium, and Mark had to rely mostly on his shepherds and permanent staff to shear his sheep—a long, arduous task. Mark was probably the only one who really enjoyed it. The smell of sheep and wool was incense to his nostrils.

Because of the shortage of labour and the increase of his flocks, he was forced to shear half of his sheep in autumn and the other half in spring. The arrangement suited the transport and market-

ing of the wool. The drays, high piled with the long wool bales, set out together for distant Sydney after each shearing; Mark's agent looked after the shipment of the wool and the drays came back laden with stores and tools and the various necessities of life and of wool-growing.

After the drays had creaked out of sight on their long journey under Wilson's charge, Mark set out on a tour of his flocks. The dry weather still persisted, and unless rain came soon, all the sheep would have to be shifted in to the river. That would not be so serious in the cooler weather as the sheep could get along on a drink every other day, but as a sheepman he hated to see the long lines of thirsty sheep toiling in to water over the arid bare soil with the dust-clouds hanging heavy over them and settling in the wool.

On his second day out, Mark was riding across a low range of rolling hills covered with heavy timber. He planned to spend the night at old Moriarty's camp where two big flocks of sheep were running; the big billabong on which they had been watering must be getting fairly low. On the broken limb of a dead tree standing solitary on the face of the ridge, something caught his eye; a strange object was hanging there—a touch of alien colour that showed up against the white trunk of the tree. As he drew closer he saw it was a coat—a blue coat—and his thoughts ran back to the tale of one of his shepherds who had found a skeleton propped up in a sitting position under a tree.

He examined the garment thoroughly. It was a fine coat made of good cloth—just the sort a gentleman would wear. There was a tear in one shoulder. Mark was quite certain it did not belong to old Tim's

skeleton; this coat had been worn within a matter of a few weeks at the outside. He cast around for tracks and found them on the softer ground below. Throwing the coat across the horse in front of him, he followed the wandering course of the faint foot-prints.

There was no doubt in his mind as to what he would find if he should reach the spot where they ended. They were boot-tracks—no escaped lag this—and the owner had been in a bad state even before he had got so far. There was no water within a score of miles of the erratic line he was following. Farther along the tracks, a discarded shirt hung dismally from a low bush. Thenceforward the foot-prints were almost obliterated under the pads of countless dingoes. Mark still kept on. Then, with a callous long-drawn croak, a crow left the ground and flapped heavily into the boughs of a tall tree just ahead, and the searcher knew he had not far to go.

Little was left on the ground to indicate more than that a man had perished there; nothing to prove whether thirst had triumphed before the dingo pack arrived.

At Moriarty's that night, Mark examined the blue coat. There were letters and papers in the capacious inner pocket, but as Moriarty and his mate were both as illiterate as Mark himself, they could gain no clue to the identity of the victim. A blood-stained clasp-knife was the only other article of note that the pockets yielded.

Darkness was falling next day when Mark rode his tired horse into the homestead clearing. The yellow light of a slush lamp was already streaming from the doorway as the dogs ran out to meet him



with yelps of welcome. Marion appeared in the opening with a glad smile lighting her face. These long tours were always a source of worry to her. Although Mark was on good terms with the blacks, they had suffered much at the hands of other whites, and there were many embittered natives roaming the country, to whom the spectacle of any solitary white man suggested another rung in the long ladder of revenge.

Mark pulled the bridle off his weary horse and left it to wander down to the waterhole for a roll in the sand and a long drink. The children crowded round him, Janet swinging on his arm and young Mark toddling at his side clasping one of his father's thick, work-calloused fingers. He threw the blue coat on the table and Mrs Wilson plucked at it with her fingers.

"That's a fine coat, Mark. Where did ye find it?"

Mark lowered himself to his seat at the head of the table.

"Out at the back of the run."

"Who owns it, then?"

"Dunno! He finished out there. Lost, I think."

Marion looked up from the open fireplace.

"It wouldna be Mr Simpson again, surely?"

Mark hesitated a moment. The thought *had* occurred to him. The coat would fit a man of Simpson's build and there was a similarity in the tracks, but the dingoes had destroyed the main evidence.

"There's some papers in the pocket, Marion," he suggested.

His wife abandoned the cooking-pots, wiping her hands on her rough apron, and turned the dusty blue coat over gingerly with her fingers. Mark, remembering the blood-stained knife, rose and ex-

tracted the little bundle of sun-dried crackling papers for her. She carried them across to the flickering yellow light of the lamp and spread them out. Her education had been good for a girl of her station, but disuse and the poor light rendered the task of deciphering the writing a difficult one.

With furrowed brow she smoothed out the letter again and her lips shaped each letter she spelt laboriously, while Mark's eyes watched the proceedings with a touch of pride that his wife should be able to make sense of those scratchy marks on a piece of paper. Suddenly Marion threw up her head, her eyes dark and tragic, one hand clutching at her breast. "*Mark! It was him . . . Mr Simpson! Oh, the poor man!*" She buried her face in her apron and sobbed without restraint. The children gazed at her in blank dismay for a moment, then they joined their tears to hers and howled in unison. Mrs Wilson rounded on them sharply, but without effect, dabbing surreptitiously at the corners of her own eyes and muttering the while to cover her feelings.

"An' to think o' the time we wasted gettin' him better so that he could go oot an' dae the same thing ower again!"

Mark sat still, his mind torn between two forces. The seed of jealousy that had found root within him burst forth again at the sight of his wife's grief for a man who was but a passing stranger. It made him feel glad that, after all, Simpson had got finally lost and would trouble them no more.

The evening meal progressed in silence and Marion made no further attempts at reading the dead man's papers.

Mark got home earlier next day. He had left

behind a still subdued Marion that morning and was not prepared for the reception that greeted him. She strode across to the stockyard, tense and vibrant, with a hard, outraged look in her eyes that held the added brilliance of not too distant tears.

"*Mark!*"

He stared at her, stung by the urgent rising inflexion of her voice, and a fear of some dreaded occurrence in his absence flashed through his mind.

"To think that I was sorry . . . that I cried for that man Simpson! The low, mean, thievin', dirty scoundrel!"

"Marion! What's the matter?"

Her grey eyes were steely and her underlip trembled with rage.

"*Simpson!*" She pronounced the name as though its passing defiled her lips. Then pulling a crumpled paper from the bosom of her dress she thrust it at the astonished man. "Do you know what that is? It's a licence . . . a land settlement licence. And it says that our run . . . the country we found and live on, the country we built our house on . . . aye, the very land we stand on at this minute . . . *has been granted to Charles Edward Simpson!*"

She paused, white faced and breathless, watching the emotions that crossed her husband's face. Stark unbelief gave way to an anxious beseeching gesture imploring that what his ears had heard was false, unreal. Marion nodded grimly.

"It's true! Every word of it! We took him in—as good as dead. We slaved and worked ourselves thin nursing him back to life." She stopped short, then continued sadly with tears creeping into her voice. "An' this is how he repays us . . . by stealing the land we found. By taking the very roof

from over our heads . . . the water and grass from our sheep . . . an' turning us homeless to start all over again looking for another place while he walks in an' enjoys the benefit o' all we've done!"

She faced her husband with the tears streaming unashamedly from her fierce hot eyes and her voice was a savage lash: "Mark Sim! This'll teach ye . . . all of us . . . next time ye find a dying man, leave him to die! Don't bring him here to steal the bread from our children's mouths!" Then the fire went out of her and she collapsed sobbing unrestrainedly against her husband's chest. "Oh, Mark . . . Mark! What are we going to do?"

Mark stood rigid, his head erect with the flaxen beard jutting belligerently and his eyes staring straight ahead. He could not believe it. How could any one take his land from him . . . take the land that he had found . . . that Jack had found and settled on long before these other white men dreamed of its existence. With the advent of the settlers he had withdrawn his boundaries to a certain extent. But to think that a man he had befriended . . . whom he had saved from certain death . . . had repaid him by stealing his land, his home! It was unbelievable.

A flood of red-hot wrath surged up within till his great chest expanded to bursting-point. Then as suddenly, the tension ebbed from his body, leaving him cold and sick in the stomach. The entire situation was beyond him. He didn't know what to do. Slowly and with heavy dragging steps he crossed the dusty stretch to the house, all unconscious of his wife clinging to his arm, and there he slumped heavily on his seat with his elbows on

the table and his head sunk in his great calloused hands.

He could not visualize things properly. His brain simply would not work. Memories flooded up from the past; things he had experienced, things old John Sim had told him. The gipsy was right. He had taught them to beware of the black man—to treat him fairly, but always to be prepared for treachery. *"But your chief enemy will always be the white man . . . the man of your own colour . . . your own blood. From him you will get neither justice nor mercy!"*

They had torn *him* from his people and imprisoned him for a trivial matter. They had done that and worse to his mother. His parents had been hounded by their own people; driven from the Cow-pastures—murdered in cold blood, eventually. A cold, unreasoning hatred of all white men welled slowly up within him, numbing his power to think sanely, narrowing his vision into a glare of hot bloody vengeance on his own race.

The air inside the dim kitchen was hot and the flies buzzed continuously, but the man sat on, motionless, silent and alone. In the other room, the wide-eyed children peered through the doorway at the grim figure and crept back to their mother's side.

Even the sound of hoof-beats did not arouse the man. Someone dismounted and rapped on the doorway with the butt of a whip and hailed in a cheerful, authoritative voice: "Any one at home?"

Marion hesitated; then she thrust the baby into her mother's arms and confronted the stranger. The quietly dressed man swept off his cabbage-tree hat and bowed. "My name is O'Brien, from up the

river. I was wondering if I could have a word with your husband!"

A glance into the dim room behind her revealed her husband sitting still and unheeding. The visitor noticed her hesitation. "Is there anything wrong? Can I be of any assistance?"

"I . . . we . . . we have had a . . . some bad news," Marion managed to stammer.

"Can I help you in any way?" There was a genuine ring of sincerity in the stranger's voice, but Marion, remembering suddenly his connexion with Simpson, refused to succumb to the invitation. She faced him instead with a hard, challenging stare.

"Have ye seen your friend Simpson lately?" she demanded.

O'Brien regarded her with surprise.

"Why, no . . . As a matter of fact, I called in on my way down river to ask if *you* had heard anything of him. He came to me from you after your timely rescue, and a few days later went back to Sydney, promising to return."

"We have heard from him." She pulled the crumpled parchment from her bodice and thrust it at O'Brien. "Look at that."

He took it in a mystified manner and held the document to the failing light. As he read, his brows contracted. He read it again, and yet again, then he drew himself up and looked directly at the woman in the doorway.

"Madam, this is infamous! Preposterous! I can't believe it! The damned young scoundrel!—Pardon me, madam. But . . . I can see now the reason for your state of feelings."

"That sort of thing, coming from a man of our

own blood . . . a man we befriended . . . nursed back from the grave . . . doesn't give us much faith in others!" She stood aside as Mark's broad shoulders appeared silently in the doorway. His blue eyes regarded his neighbour with icy cold hostility and he pointed to the paper in his hand.

"What part did you have in this business?" he demanded thickly. O'Brien started, and his face paled at the direct affront. He stood tense and silent, wrestling with his feelings, then he looked Mark in the eyes.

"That is an insult I would take from no man! But knowing the reason, I will tell you this: Simpson is no friend of mine, nor ever was. He left his own country for his country's good with a sum of money to keep him here and a letter of introduction from a friend of mine to do what I could for him. I also received a letter from that friend telling the full facts of the case, so I was quite prepared—but not for this piece of villainy. What are you going to do?"

Marion pushed forward. "What *can* we do?" she demanded bitterly.

Mark's red eyes narrowed on the man in front of him and his great hands twitched.

"If he was not dead, I would tear him apart with my own hands!"

"Dead? But is he dead?"

Marion nodded sullenly and gestured with a thumb to the north. "Got lost again. That paper was in his coat."

"Then I'm glad to hear it," O'Brien replied crisply. "And that simplifies matters too." He glanced interrogatively at Mark. "You never took out a settler's licence for your land?"

The bearded head moved from side to side in a slow-grudging negative.

"Simpson discovered that, and went straight back to Sydney. He took out this licence which covers the maximum area of twenty square miles; that is only a narrow strip of your run, but the cunning scoundrel saw to it that it took in your entire frontage to the river. Without that, the back country would be useless in a dry season. He 'squatted' on you, sir! The vile practice is only too common nowadays and we must safeguard ourselves."

"It's too late now."

"Not at all. Simpson is dead!"

Husband and wife glanced quickly at one another—a glance charged with hope. O'Brien spoke again, musingly.

"There is an easy way. . . . This land has been registered in the name of Simpson. Sim . . . pson—Simpson."

Marion looked up sharply. "You mean . . . change our name?"

O'Brien nodded calmly.

"It would save a lot of bother. To get this document transferred you would have to prove Simpson's death, you would need to supply personal references from a magistrate . . ."

Mark snorted.

"I never worried much about my name. But that! . . . It would be like crawling into a stinking dingo's skin!" He pondered a while, then shook himself free of the heaviness that had settled on him.

"Let your horses go, Mr O'Brien. You'll stop the night with us? I would like to talk with you."

CHAPTER XXII

WITHIN the space of the half-dozen years since his previous visit, Mark found Sydney changed to an unbelievable extent. After the quiet of the bush he found the atmosphere of the growing city almost unbearable; all the little hills and coves that he remembered as a boy covered with trees and framed in solitude were now defaced by houses, singly and in rows that forced people to walk willy-nilly within the bounds of their constricted streets. The skyline was broken by the lazy sails of windmills and the coves bristled with the masts and spars of ships.

Everywhere, there was noise and bustle and shrill cries, while a weird variety of smells offended the nostrils at every turn. The narrow, twisting streets were full of people. Bearded settlers in blue shirts, strapped trousers, and long riding-boots, with broad leather belts at the waist sagging under a miscellany of pouches for tobacco, knife, and pistol, and with big cabbage-tree hats atop, jostled drunken sailors and leary currency toughs. The clean-shaven, more formally dressed city folk threaded a circumspect way between them all, and the red coats and white crossbelts of the soldiers livened the general colour scheme. Grog shops abounded, each with its lounging knot of cornstalks, half-drunken molls, and the riff-raff of the port. Here and there on bare, vacant allotments squatted little groups of aborigines—the original owners of the country—lingering on in the depths of degradation. Small family groups subsisting on offal or the pro-

ceeds of what they could beg or bargain for the shameful use of their gins.

George Street boasted some fine buildings: its shops were a delight to Marion and a source of open-eyed wonder to the children. In fact, had it not been for their sake, Mark would have turned his back on the city as soon as his more important affairs had been settled. Shortly after their arrival at the cottage on Brickfield Hill where they boarded with an old Irishwoman—Mark could not bear the crowded, noisy hotels—he handed a great roll of notes to Marion.

"You'll want to buy some things for yourself and the children."

Marion looked at the formidable roll in amazement.

"But, Mark . . . I could never spend all that! Did you take all your money out of the bank?"

Mark indulged in a broad grin.

"There's plenty more. You can hold your head as high as any of them fine ladies, Marion. I've been sellin' wool and sheep for all those years and we haven't spent much."

Marion sat down weakly on the nearest chair. She had got so used to the bush habit of assessing a man's wealth by his sheep and cattle and horses that all thoughts of hard cash had slipped her memory of late. Now she realized they were rich. She . . . the one-time servant girl, the daughter of a small Scottish farmer . . . rich beyond her wildest dreams. For a few breathless moments her frugal Scottish impulses were swamped under a wild, exultant dream of an orgy of spending. Dresses, bonnets, boots, a bracelet and a brooch or two from the jewellers' shops. She would dress the

children. Mark . . . she brought her prancing horse of dreams to earth and shook her head sadly at the thought. Mark . . . whose idea of full dress was a dungaree coat and trousers, whose feet had never yielded to boots and never would. The spectacle of herself and the children, all dressed up, in company with Mark, would draw the derision of the whole town. She was beginning to realize that sudden acquisition of wealth had its drawbacks.

Then one day as she passed the agent's office, Jones the agent intercepted her. There was a rueful expression on his face as he ushered her into his dusty little room.

"It's about your husband, Mrs Sim. . . . You know he wants to meet the Pure Merinos—at least, he wants to see their sheep, which is the same thing. Well, I've done my best, but they just look at him and turn away. It's his clothes, ma'am, and not so much that as . . . his feet. Do you think you could get him to wear a pair of boots—while he's in Sydney, at any rate?"

Marion shook her head regretfully. "I doubt it." Then as a shadow darkened the doorway she turned to face Mark's look of astonishment at finding her there. Jones got to his feet, covered with confusion; but Marion took charge of the situation.

"Sit down, Mark!" she said calmly. "I've just had a talk with Mr Jones and he's quite right."

Mark shot a suspicious glance from one to the other.

"What about?"

"Your clothes, Mark. If you want to mix with these men you'll have to get some new clothes. And you're coming with me now—Mr Jones is coming too to help us."

Mark stared at her in astonishment.

"*Me!* Do you think I would dress up like a parrot in one of those fancy coats!"

"Not for a minute, Mark. But a blue shirt and trousers like all the men wear on the river—Mr O'Brien, the Hawdons. Do they look like parrots?"

". . . *and boots?* Not for me!" Mark rose to his full height and his deep voice was vibrant with indignation. "Jones, if these fellows want to know something about me, I'll show them. Take some of the best fleeces out of the bales in your store and put them in your street window there. If they know anything about wool, that will bring them in."

Jones jumped to his feet and rubbed his hands gleefully together.

"A great idea."

But Marion, deciding she might as well hang for a sheep as a lamb, interrupted firmly:

"It may bring them here, but it won't keep them. If you want to be seen in their company, Mark, you'll have to be properly dressed."

It was an ordeal, but once started Marion did not rest until it was accomplished. Mark looked himself over sadly; the blue shirt was all right, the tight-fitting trousers he loathed, but the boots—the biggest pair the colony boasted that accommodated with difficulty his great calloused feet, as hard soled themselves as the leather that encased them—represented the ultimate sign of his discomfort and degradation.

He shuffled clumsily around and refused to venture into town until daylight began to fade.

"I feel like a hobbled horse!" he lamented bitterly.

Next morning he installed himself early in Jones's office and spent a gloomy hour looking past his

outstretched boots at the dusty street and the bizarre procession of figures and assorted vehicles that passed along it. No matter where he looked the boots seemed to creep into view and the sight of them soured his already jaundiced thoughts. Then into his line of vision rode a horseman with all the marks of a countryman with money to spend. He wore a gay-checked shirt, tight white trousers that ended in tall, shining riding-boots and heavy spurs, a red silk handkerchief knotted round his neck, and a wide-brimmed cabbage-tree hat tilted over one eye at a jaunty angle. The big, spirited chestnut he rode looked nervously around at the unaccustomed sights and minced lightly on its toes, its silver mane and tail floating proudly.

Mark stared, first at the horse, then at the gaily appointed rider. Then with a bound he was out on the street, completely forgetting the cumbersome boots. Only one man he had ever seen could sit a horse like that fellow. He cupped his hands to his mouth and a wild, wavering aboriginal yell broke from his lips. People turned and stared with consternation in their eyes; a grave-eyed old black-fellow down near the Barracks shot to his feet and grabbed a handful of long spears ready for battle. The chestnut was spun on its haunches, scattering a little flock of sheep and sundry pedestrians in its vicinity; then, galvanized to sudden action, it bounded like an arrow in the direction of the big bearded man, the rider sweeping off his hat to the accompaniment of a wild, ear-piercing yell as he swept through the scattering throng. He jerked the chestnut to a standstill and his feet hit the ground before it had stopped.

"*Mark!* Man, I'm glad to see you."

A great hand closed tightly on his shoulder.

"I knew it was you, Jack!"

Then each surveyed the unaccustomed sartorial grandeur of the other and together they stood back and roared with laughter like a couple of irresponsible schoolboys. The crowd that had gathered gave way as they walked back to Brickfield Hill, oblivious of everything and of every one beyond themselves, and firing questions at one another all the way. Birrong and portion of her numerous family were at Parramatta; closer to Sydney she would not venture. Young John and his brothers were looking after the cattle in their parents' absence.

"My word! You should see my cattle now, Mark! That A. A. Company has fine bulls, fine cows—an' so have I!" He slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously. "That company, Mark, he's got plenty money. He buys big bulls an' sends them here in ships. But they can't look after them. After a little while, Ole Man Bull he likes the country, he gets full of feed an' maybe he hears a cow sing out long way off. S'pose them ole lags try to stop him, he just shakes his head and walks on, an' they climb a tree! Or maybe a cow sneaks away to have a calf—she meets 'nother lot of cows an' calfs that sneaked away before. None of them calfs got a brand—not till I come there, anyway!" He staggered laughingly about the road, waving his arms in sheer enjoyment.

They spent the day together, comparing notes and talking till they were tired. Jack rode blithely back to Parramatta that evening, promising to bring Birrong and the family on a visit next day.

When Mark set out on his customary stroll to Jones's office the following day he was in such a happy frame of mind that the fact that he was walking in the accursed boots was forgotten for the moment, and he strode along nodding a salute to the old woman who was always seated on the doorstep of her cottage smoking her clay pipe at that hour. The tale of Jack's prosperity, together with the realization of his own success, gave him a warm, triumphant feeling that was not entirely personal.

For the first time he realized that the family founded by John Sim had attained a degree of importance in the colony. True it was that Jack was regarded by many as a "squatter," a term that until lately was even more opprobrious than calling a man a convict. He himself was still practically unknown. But Jones's propaganda, intended, needless to say, to accentuate his own importance as agent for men of influence, had given Mark a certain standing in Sydney business circles. When he entered the Bank of New South Wales, the manager waited on him in person. Men who barely glanced at the barefooted, roughly clad individual looked at him with interest after Jones's whisper reached their ears.

"Mark Sim! Thousands of sheep . . . finest run on the Murrumbidgee!"

Mark's blunt, direct manner was a complete defence against adulation and sycophancy. But the new feeling of power was something worth cultivating. It was an asset, a weapon, an instrument that would unlock doors and carry him to greater heights. The Pure Merinos might look down their arrogant noses at him, despise him because he wore no boots and could not write his name, but not one

of them could match him in experience. None of them knew the country as he did; he had been born in it, lived closer to it all his life than any other white man and—he was a sheepman.

There were two strangers in Jones's office: a dark, sharp-featured man in bush clothes and a tall, well-dressed man with an air of quiet reserve. They looked up from their inspection of Mark's fleeces and, with a swift reassuring glance at Mark's boots, Jones hailed the newcomer, beaming with satisfaction. "Here's Mr Sim himself, gentlemen. This is Mr Cox from Mudgee and Mr Bettington of Brindley Park."

The two men bowed stiffly, and Mark, after a brief nod, surveyed them with interest and left them to open the conversation.

"Very nice wool, sir!" commented Mr Cox. "These are picked fleeces, I presume?"

Mark shook his head coolly.

"No. We took them out of a bale."

"Have you much wool like this?"

Mark turned to Jones.

"How many bales of Aa in this lot?"

Jones dived into the drawer of his desk and consulted a tattered, well-thumbed account book.

"Fourteen bales!" he announced with an air of triumph.

The visitors exchanged surprised glances. One of them turned again to Mark.

"But do you mean to say that *all* the wool in those bales is like this?"

Mark nodded.

"I class it myself." Then added casually: "This is from only half of my sheep. I shear the others after the cold weather."

Two pairs of eyebrows lifted and a mounting interest displaced the stiffness that had hitherto characterized their bearing. Mark answered their questions frankly, although some were a little difficult. Mr Bettington asked:

"But what sheep are these—Saxons or Spanish?"

"I used Saxon rams on the Spanish ewes. Now I breed my own rams."

"But where did they come from?" the questioner persisted. "Did you get your ewes from Captain Macarthur?"

"I just picked them up here and there," Mark replied easily. "The rams came mostly from Mr Riley of Raby." He turned to Cox and took over the role of interrogator.

"They tell me, Mr Cox, that you don't wash your sheep before shearing?"

The dark complexioned man nodded. "No . . . we wash the wool in warm water after it is shorn. It is quicker, and easier on the sheep. But the washing has to be very carefully done."

"I think I'll try that. Everybody says, 'No. Wash the sheep.' But you can wash wool in hotter water than you can put a sheep into. It *should* be better!"

He addressed Mr Bettington.

"I heard a man say that you have nothing but good sheep!"

The well-dressed man bowed at the direct compliment.

"I have not many sheep. Each year I get rid of all but the best, and I am always trying to buy better rams. I would be glad to have your opinion of my flock should you be in the neighbourhood at any time."

"And my brother and I will be glad to see you, too, sir!" added Cox as they picked up their hats and prepared to depart. Mark returned the invitation, concealing his satisfaction at the accomplishment of his task. When the two men had passed into the street he grinned shamelessly at the triumphant Jones.

"I suppose you think the boots did that, eh?"

When he got back to the cottage, Jack and his family had arrived. Birrong dazzled the eye with an amazing gown in which all the primary colours fought for predominance. At thirty-nine she was beginning to show the effects of prolific maternity and the dark blood in her veins was beginning to show through. She had got fat and the golden brown of her skin had faded to a sallow tinge; but she was more cheerful and talkative than ever.

From behind Birrong's back, a tall, slim, brown-eyed girl smiled roguishly at Mark. The metamorphosis of Ann made him gasp. The wild young tomboy who had pulled his beard and harried him mercilessly had grown into a woman. Ann at twenty was beautiful; even the garish, badly fitting dress she wore could not hide the natural grace of her movements or the perfection of her budding womanhood. Her dark hair was cut short at the neck and her finely chiselled features, full red lips, sparkling teeth, and the bloom and vitality of perfect health combined in a breath-taking beauty fit to turn the head of any man.

She held out two slim arms toward her uncle, then, with a wicked little laugh she launched herself at him, threw her arms round his neck and buried her face in his great beard. Mark grinned sheepishly at his wife over her shoulder—the girl was

taller than her uncle. Then with the swirling rush of a willy-willy, two other girls appeared from nowhere and threw themselves on him. Kareela at sixteen promised to be another Ann, and little Bidgee, three years her junior, was at the wild, carefree age that still rebelled at wearing clothes. Alongside them, Marion's children appeared demure and a trifle uncertain as to how to treat their boisterous cousins.

Mark and Jack withdrew to the thin-dappled shade of a gum-tree and squatted on their heels for a yarn. Before long, with a grunt of discomfort, Mark sat back and dragged off his boots. He spread his toes out to the sunlight with a deep sigh of satisfaction, and in a moment Jack followed suit. Then they leaned contemplatively back, their contented eyes on the comings and goings of their families. Mark was the first to break the silence.

"Ann's grown a big girl," he said. "S'pose she'll be gettin' a man soon!"

Jack nodded lightly.

"One young fellow comes about the place a lot. I thought at first it was me he come to see."

"Is he all right?"

"He's a funny fellow! Talks funny—that Pure Merino talk. Come out on a ship, an' going to get a place for himself. . . . But he talks all the time about sheep."

Mark laughed quietly at his brother's tone of disgust.

"Ann like him?"

"I think so! She laughs at him. He can't ride an' he's always gettin' lost. My word, you should see Ann ride!" he added enthusiastically. "She's

nearly as good as young John—an' he'll be better'n me soon. He'll ride anything, that fellow!"

Mark turned thoughtfully on one elbow.

"What are you goin' to do up there? Sell all your cattle and start again?"

"Maybe. I dunno!" replied the unabashed Jack. "I made plenty money last time I sold out. Got a lot in the bank."

"What bank?"

"Bank of Australia."

"Hmm . . . that's where the Pure Merinos keep their money. I've got mine in the New South Wales. That's where most of the old people go—they call them emancipists now. Folk that used to be lags."

Jack contemplated the bullock drays and gigs and an odd pedestrian passing in swirls of dust along the road below.

"I wonder what the Old Man would think of all this!"

Mark regarded his brother fixedly a moment, then he asked pointedly:

"I wonder what he'd think of *us*?"

Jack turned lazily.

"We've done all right. I got plenty cattle . . . better cattle an' better horses than he ever saw. Plenty money in the bank an' a big family. You've got plenty sheep . . . better'n old Macarthur had when John Sim was here. Better country than the Valley. An' your family's comin' on. Take you long time to catch me, though," he added with a grin.

Mark smiled good-humouredly, then became serious again.

"You remember this place when we were at the old hut? All lags and soldiers; one or two ticket-

of-leave men and some soldiers tryin' to grow corn and raise sheep—the old hairy ones. Then Macarthur and old Parson Marsden and Cox and Riley and some more of them started to grow wool with better sheep—merinos—and better cattle and horses. They found, same as we did, that this is good country and it grows good stock."

Jack nodded concurrence and Mark continued:

"Look at it now! Ships comin' all the time, bringin' men with money to buy sheep and cattle, to get land. One time, there was so many lags they couldn't feed 'em. Now they can't bring out enough to do the work for these fellows. One time, the far-out settlers were them fellows on the Hawkesbury—and us. Now they've gone on and on . . . all down the Murrumbidgee and down the big Murray River. Joe Hawdon tells me it's fine country down there, and a Guv-mint fellow—that Major Mitchell—has gone across the Murray to join up with another settlement down on the sea coast. All the time they go on and on and find more country . . . better country."

"I know," Jack replied. "A fellow came through my place—Allan Cunningham was his name. He had been away up north. Fine country, he reckoned . . . better'n mine. He called it the Darling Downs. Maybe I go there some day. . . . But I dunno. . . . I'm gettin' old now. Anyway, young John *he'll* go!"

Mark turned over on his elbow, his eyes on the drifting traffic at his feet.

"Things are changin', Jack! Our Old Man had to hide away or he would have been hanged. We don't have to hide. But we don't want to keep goin' on and on, farther out than every one else. We

have as much right here as any of 'em. . . . But we've got to learn how to hold our land. I nearly lost mine through trickery." He paused and his eyes darkened at the bitter memory. "We have as much land as any of these settlers. Our sheep and cattle and horses are as good as the best of theirs and better than most. They'll deal with us. But the old ones—the Pure Merinos—won't mix with us. It don't matter much to you or me. But I'm thinkin' of the young ones."

"Well, they'll be all right."

"They've got to go on where we leave off."

"We've got plenty cattle and sheep for them."

"We can give them that, but we've got to teach them what John Sim didn't teach us—how to deal with the white man. They've got to learn the white man's tricks—how to read and write in books and papers and . . . and all them things."

Jack looked at him curiously and his voice held a bantering note.

"Marion been talkin', eh?"

Mark nodded unabashed.

"She's right, too. Why do you laugh?"

"Just thinkin' of them young uns of mine goin' to school! They're wild as dingoes." Then he added with more than a hint of parental pride in his voice: "Me, I like 'em that way."

Mark looked at him under half-closed eyelids.

"Yes . . . and a mob of colts and fillies look fine galloping wild about the country. But what use are they till you break 'em to ridin' or to harness? The colt don't like that. But that's what you bred him for . . . and you know it's better to break 'em young!"

Jack rose to his feet, still smiling, and picked up his discarded boots.

"I like 'em wild," he said with an air of finality.

CHAPTER XXIII

"FROM the Manning to Moruya, from the Lachlan to the sea." The old boundaries of law and order had long since been trampled flat under the eager feet of the land-seekers. In the throes of its growing pains, New South Wales had stretched away out beyond the limit of any one man's knowledge. Even the explorers found themselves outdistanced in the feverish rush to take up new country.

In his day, John Sim the fugitive had been a piece of flotsam driven along always out in front of the wave of settlement. But now that his sons had settled in its path, the wave hurried past them carrying on its crest the eager army of the land hungry.

Up in the north, Jack cheerfully sold his cattle at exorbitant prices to the endless stream of new settlers, and strangely enough the size of his herd never seemed to decrease to any great extent. Some of his neighbours declared with a touch of asperity that even his bullocks seemed to have calves, but Jack remained unruffled. If the big stations happened to be careless about branding their calves it was their worry, not his. People cut a distinguishing earmark on their cattle with a knife. Jack improved on the system: he cut the top half off both ears of his cattle, a scheme which rendered his stock easily conspicuous, although some people did suggest that the missing half-ears had already borne another mark.

Down on the Murrumbidgee, Mark was firmly established, a rock past which the ever-increasing

flood poured on its way west and south. The days of isolation were gone, and the steady stream of civilization was smoothing corners and adding a polish of knowledge as it passed. Around the homestead a settlement had sprung up. Two wings had been added to the house itself to provide for Mark's growing family and the exigencies of a large station. The demands of travellers on his own frugal supplies had strained the limits of Mark's open hospitality.

At Marion's suggestion he opened a small station store with the children's tutor in charge. In no time at all, the store business had expanded to such an extent that Mark was glad to rid himself of it. The tutor, a discouraged settler of the first wave who had lost all his capital in the purchase of experience, jumped at the offer and erected a new slab-and-bark building down by the creek.

It was years now since Joe Hawdon had made overlanding history by taking the first mob of cattle through to the new colony on Port Phillip. He had since added to his fame by blazing the trail from Port Phillip to the infant settlement at Adelaide, discovering Lake Victoria and a wealth of rich country on the track.

Two years had passed since his brother, John Hawdon, undertook the first mail contract between Port Phillip, the new southern township, and Sydney, forging the first link of regular communication over the unmapped five-hundred-mile track. His mailman, Burke, was a well-known identity on the road nowadays, dressed in a leather suit with a pair of pistols in his belt and the leather mailbags strapped across the front of his saddle. He travelled fast, but he had always time to pass on

the news of the world to Marion or old James Wilson when he halted for a meal and to change horses at the homestead.

Nowadays, a broad, well-defined track cut by the sharp hoofs of thousands of sheep and cattle and by the broad tyres of the pioneers' drays followed the winding length of the river and then across the hills toward Sydney. The land mania boomed stock prices to giddy heights. Nothing less than three pounds would buy a sheep: six pounds a ram. Then, after a run of good seasons, another drought settled on the land, making its appearance stealthily as usual so that the newcomers failed to realize that it was upon them. The little creeks and waterholes dried up, the river frontages were eaten bare by the travelling stock. Station owners found themselves forced to put their own sheep on the road in search of relief country.

As the drought showed every indication of persisting, Mark decided to sell off most of his sheep, retaining only the best of the ewes and rams. He had made the important discovery that on the dry, salubrious inland country, away from green grass and running streams, sheep grew bigger and stronger and healthier. Up on the high tablelands, sheep pined, grew slowly and remained stunted, and suffered eternally from catarrh. On the lush green grass they went lame with footrot. In a dry time, the green grass withered and left the ground bare, but out in the backblocks there was always some picking for sheep on the dry tussocks and they thrived on the low scrub when stock lay down and died elsewhere.

Old Wilson had abandoned his early ambition to take up land on his own account. His interest in

Mark's station was as keen as though it had been his own; anyhow, his daughter was the wife of its owner and one day, when he was gone, his grandchildren would own all this land. That was enough for him. He remained in charge of the station during Mark's visits to Sydney and acted as his sage counsellor at all times.

Mark arrived home late one evening, tired and dispirited after a heavy day of treating sheep affected with scab. Wilson rallied him philosophically.

"It's hard work. But, man, they've got mair to put up wi' back in Scotland. What would ye dae if the maggots started to eat your living sheep?"

"How could they?" Mark grunted.

"Ye've seen the worms eatin' the dead beasts, haven't ye?"

Mark nodded. "That's different!"

"Well, the flies lay their eggs on the living sheep there, too. Maybe they just havena learned how to dae it here—an' I hope they never do!"

The mailman with his leather-clad legs stretched wearily toward the fire nodded sombre concurrence.

"It would be the end of this country!" He filled his pipe with slow deliberation, lit it with a glowing coal from the fire and turned gravely to Mark.

"How are things?"

"Just the same. It's a good thing I sold most of my sheep. What's left have enough to live on if the water back there will only hold out. How are things down below?"

"Bad. Did you know the river had stopped running?"

Marion, catching the remark in passing, exclaimed incredulously:

"The Murrumbidgee stopped running?"

Mark nodded solemnly as he lifted his young son to his knee. "The blacks told me yesterday. They say it has never happened before."

The mailman continued gloomily.

"There's dead sheep and cattle and horses from here to the Murray and beyant. They're dead on the track and they're dead and dying in the mud of the waterholes with the crows picking their eyes out."

"Is it as bad on Port Phillip?"

"Not a bit of it! They're as mad down there as ever they were here. . . . And worse! Everybody's got money to burn. They'll buy anything at all. They're building new banks. And the price of land in Melbourne. . . ! You wouldn't believe it." He shook his head sadly. "I know a fellow that bought an allotment three months back for one hundred and fifty pounds. He sold it just before I left this time for ten thousand pounds!"

Mark's bushy eyebrows lifted incredulously, but the mailman rambled on.

"When the auctioneers have a sale now, they do it in style—chicken to eat and champagne to drink for all comers."

"What's this champagne?" demanded old Wilson.

"Gentlemen's brew! A fizzy sort of wine that only the quality could afford once. I passed a couple of bullock-teams camped on the road the other day, and there's the drivers—as lovely a pair of lags as ever you clapped eyes on—breaking bottles of champagne into a bucket and swilling their 'gentlemen's brew' like pigs in a trough."

"There's trouble ahead for all of us," Mark opined soberly. "The price of wool is still going

down, and there won't be much wool to ship this year, not from Sydney, anyway."

"They're shearing the few sheep they've got left, down the river—and still paying the shearers a pound a hundred and four glasses of rum a day. When are you making for Sydney?"

Mark pursed his lips doubtfully.

"When the rain comes. I want to see how the new sheep are farin'."

"You mean them big long-legged fellows with no horns—Leicesters, they call 'em? What did they bring *them* in for?"

"To make the merino bigger and to grow longer wool."

"Well, I don't know much about sheep, but I heard that all them fellows that used Leicesters on their stud sheep are hopping about on one leg wishing they had never been born. They tell me the lambs are the greatest lot of mongrels that ever hit the country—and that's saying a lot."

Mark's eyes contracted.

"That's what I expected! I didn't think the two bloods would mix." He stirred restlessly on his seat, then turned to Wilson. "There's going to be a shortage of pure-bred rams. We're going to nurse everything we've got." He got to his feet with an air of decision, and nodded a good night to the mailman. "I'll ride with you in the morning!"

But when the morning came, the mailman rode alone. Three more days elapsed before Mark set out for Sydney. Then with him rode Marion, plump and matronly, astride her old brown horse, and young Janet, alternating between thrills of pleasure and foreboding at the prospect that had suddenly been sprung on her.

Janet was thirteen, a plain-featured, serious-eyed child with straight flaxen hair hanging in two long, neat plaits from under her sunbonnet. For the past few days she had seethed with the excitement that centred on her. She was going to Sydney—to school—to learn a lot of things that old Mr O'Mara couldn't teach her; and also learn to be a young lady. She was rather uncertain about the portent of that last part. When she did anything wrong, her mother's reprimand usually ended with some reference to "being a lady." It savoured of discomfort—a cramping of freedom—and the little imp of mischief that lived hidden behind her prim blue eyes felt somewhat chill at the prospect.

The preparations for the long trip had been great fun. Old Matt, the blacksmith, had put new shoes on all the horses, including Possum, her own shaggy pony. All her best clothes had been carefully folded in calico and packed away in the leather pack-bags that smelt of meat and salt and other things all gone musty. She had enjoyed the fuss Grandpa and Grannie Wilson had made of her in these parting days, to say nothing of the added superiority this preferential treatment had given her over her young brothers and sisters.

But when they mounted their horses as the sun peeped over the trees and the cool scents of the night still hung on the air, a surge of fear and premonition brought a lump to her throat. When she looked back from the bend in the track for a last look at the homestead where she had been born and where she had always lived, the tears in her eyes formed a veil through which the figures of Grandpa and Grannie Wilson, young Mark, James and Maggie, Mr O'Mara and the group of skinny-

limbed blacks, appeared indistinct as though a screen had already been interposed between her and all those people and things she loved.

She jogged Possum up between her father's big mare and Marion's broad-backed horse to draw some comfort from their presence and to try to banish the dreariness that lay chill round her heart. Mark looked down at the disconsolate face in the poke bonnet, then with a significant glance at his wife he urged his horse into a canter and away they all went. They passed the jingling packs and spare horses driven along by Warrigal and Bullio in a cloud of dust.

The livelier action quickened Janet's pulse and her tears were for the moment forgotten. The dry, dusty track wound away ahead between the silent, drooping trees and the air was already dry and brittle with the promise of another hot day. Her active mind switched to the promised luxury of shopping; already, her nostrils expanded to the musty odour of cloths and stuffs being unrolled in dark, mysterious shops piled high with boxes and bundles. That *was* something to look forward to.

The journey was longer and more arduous than usual. The devastating hand of drought lay heavy on the land; there was no grass within miles of the river, the trees and shrubs drooped despondently in the brassy glare of the sun, their leaves and bark powdered with dust. Except around the drying waterholes, they encountered no sign of life. Pathetic little mounds covered with dust-crusts fleeces dotted the sheep runs and lay thick round the vanished waterholes. It was a depressing nightmare of a journey. The few settlers who still lingered on their bare, eaten-out stations were

haggard, desperate men; tired to the point of exhaustion with the fruitless, unending slavery of trying to save their stock; sullen and harried to the verge of insanity as the meagre remnants of their flocks dwindled daily before their eyes.

It took Mark and his party ten days to reach Parramatta, and over most of the journey the horses had little to eat, and sometimes they went two days without a drink. Progress had been delayed chiefly by the fact that Marion had not made allowances for the years she had spent out of the saddle. Even the exhausted horses did not hail the end of the trip with the relief she felt when she dropped stiffly on to her bed at the Woolpack Inn.

Mark left her and Janet there to recuperate and hired a horse to continue the journey to Sydney. The effects of the long drought were not yet apparent here; coastal showers kept the grass green, and the new immigrants with money to invest that arrived with every ship still outnumbered the bearers of bad news that straggled in from the bush. Apart from that, Sydney had assumed a new social importance. The combined efforts of the emancipists, fighting to preserve their independence which demanded a new background, had borne fruit and England had ceased to send her convict ships to Sydney. New dwellings, new wharves and business houses were springing up on every hand and the thriving city was throwing tentacles of habitation far and wide.

At the Haymarket, Mark turned his horse toward an excited concourse and arrived at the stockyard just as an aspiring rider parted company with his horse amid the delighted yells of the crowd clustering on the rails. It was a mixed gathering; ragged,

leary currency lads mingled with sun-tanned, bearded bushmen, dilapidated natives and their slatternly gins. A few townsmen and fashionables looked on and joined in the excitement. As the crestfallen rider brushed the dust off his clothes, a stout red-faced man opposite Mark voiced his opinion for all the world to hear.

"I tell ye, he ain't a norse: he's a divvle—an' the man ain't born wot can ride 'im."

A rude, derisive sound from a flashly-dressed young man perched on the top rail interrupted the portly one. His ruddy complexion suffused with anger and his eyes popped almost out of his head.

"Maybe *you* think ye could ride 'im, then," he spluttered. I'll wager five pun he couldn't stay on 'im as long as Tom 'ere!"

The youth smiled contemptuously and, stretching a white-breeched leg adorned with high boots, he drew a fat roll of notes from his pocket. Carelessly peeling a note from it, he held it toward the speaker.

"Where's your money?"

The fat man sagged like a deflated balloon. His hands fumbled with his coat pockets; then, with keen reluctance, he pulled a bulging pocket-book from an inner pocket and thumbed the contents, conscious that every eye was on him and that his bluff had been called. He turned to a gentleman in a brass-buttoned blue coat.

"Will you hold the stakes, Mr Morrison?"

"Certainly, sir!"

In the meantime, at a signal from the young man on the rails, a boy of about fifteen had dropped into the yard. He unsaddled the big rangy chestnut that stood quivering slightly with ears laid back and the whites of its eyes showing. Then the boy stepped

back to the middle of the yard and began to swing a long black stockwhip. Mark, seized with a new interest in the proceedings, pressed closer as the chestnut started convulsively forward and began to circle the yard stiff-legged, its tensed thighs creaking hollowly with each step. Its nervous eye was on the swinging black thong and its off side brushed the rails in the effort to keep out of range.

Mark's attention was fixed, not on the horse, but on the boy in the centre of the yard. Quite a few cattlemen had recognized the value of the stockwhip to their trade, but only one family had the knack of plaiting the long balanced thongs and of handling them as that boy was doing. The snake-like lash circled his head slowly, following the quarter of the horse with a barely perceptible *flick* rippling down its length to end with a quivering snap at the tapered extremity.

A gasp went up from the crowd and men craned eagerly forward. While the eyes of all the spectators—and of the horse—had been focused on the boy with the stockwhip, the youth in the white breeches and bright red shirt had landed on the sweating back of the chestnut as it passed below him.

In a fraction of a second, the horse seemed to dart forward and shoot up in a whirling buck till his back arched like a horseshoe and his bony head and stiff rod of a tail met beneath him. As he came down, his feet jarring in the dust, the rider swept off his big cabbage-tree hat and slapped the corded shoulder of the horse, at the same time letting out a wild, piercing yell that brought every blackfellow within hearing racing, spears in hand.

The chestnut bucked and twisted, grunting and

squealing savagely, but never once shifting the confident rider sitting easily on the plunging, arched back and smacking his hat down on the sweating shoulder at every buck to the accompaniment of wild, outlandish yells. The crowd was on its toes with an excitement that swept away the veneer of social position and brought larrikin and gentleman shoulder to shoulder, heart in 'mouth, at the impotence of the vicious bucking fiend even to ruffle the easy bravado of the rider. Even the slant-eyed larrikin who had sneaked round on the chance of filching the wager from the gentleman in the blue coat, forgot his errand in the excitement.

The horse stopped, his flanks heaving and pouring with sweat, his head bowed and the breath labouring from the wide red nostrils in long sobbing gusts that raised little spurts in the dust. The rider vaulted jauntily to the ground with the seat and inside of the legs of his white breeches black with sweat. He climbed out of the yard and swaggered through the crowd clustering to clap him on the shoulder, to the stake holder.

"A fine ride, my lad!" The blue-coated gentleman held out the notes and the young man took them with a careless nod and thrust them into his trouser-pocket.

"Come on, lads," he beckoned. "Come and wash the dust down."

The currency element swarmed eagerly after him, leaving a few bushmen hesitating in their wake while the little group of blue and buff and plum tail-coats drew together with a general air of disapproval.

Mark's eyes followed the noisy crowd of hangers-on with deep concern till he became conscious of the

boy with the stockwhip regarding him from the rails. Their glances met and Mark's bearded features broke into a welcoming smile. There was no need to question the parentage of that thin, slightly hooked nose and the warm, brown eyes. "Which one are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Larry!" came the immediate response. Then, after a pause: "You're Mark, ain't you?"

"I am." He waited till the boy approached. "That's young John up there?"

The boy nodded hesitantly. "We're waitin' on the Ole Man. He should be here with the rest of the cattle to-day."

"Where did John get that money?"

"We came ahead and sold our cattle. The Ole Man's got the lame ones and the old cows."

"Why don't you go out and give him a hand to bring them in?"

The boy's bare toes fidgeted in the grey dust.

"Is it young John?" Mark demanded with an inclination of the head toward the distant grog shop.

Larry nodded. Then, with a touch of bravado:

"He can drink rum just like them other fellows!"

Mark snorted in his beard.

"Then we'd better go and get him before that crowd gets all his money." He handed the reins to Larry and headed straight for the low-roofed shack. Half a dozen raucous urchins were engaged in teasing a shrivelled old woman crouching in her rags near the door, one clawlike hand holding a blackened clay pipe between her toothless gums.

Mark paused in the doorway, his broad shoulders touching the jambs on both sides. It was some little time before his eyes recovered sufficiently from the outer glare to pick out objects in the dark,

smoky interior. Young Johnny was holding the floor, one elbow leaning on the sloppy bar counter. His ragged audience clustered around him, lending their ears to his boastful anecdotes while their covetous eyes focused on the bulging pocket of his tight trousers. Johnny threw up his head as Mark sauntered across.

"Come and have a drink!" he invited grandiloquently. The sycophantic crowd gave way grudgingly with sullen, slant-eyed glares at the newcomer, and the gap closed behind him as he passed through.

Mark placed a heavy hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Come on outside, Johnny. I want to talk to you."

John peered at the bearded face in annoyance. "Talk to me here!" he rejoined thickly. "We're all mates. Ain't we?" he demanded of the crowd.

"Course we are!"

"That's right!" The mob surged closer round the pair and the situation looked distinctly ugly. They already looked on the roll of notes as their own and the prospect of losing them now rallied the pack of cut-throats to instant unity.

Mark sized up the position at a glance round the dark, smoky hovel. Johnny's head was beginning to nod heavily. Whatever it was that the larrikins had slipped into his drink was beginning to take effect. The gang withdrew a few paces and took up battle positions round the walls and blocking the narrow doorway. Long, murderous knives appeared in their hands and one squat, cross-eyed tough with an evil, lopsided snarl on his thin lips dangled a club suggestively from one hand. The beetle-browed proprietor had disappeared.

At that moment Johnny's knees gave way and Mark caught the limp body as it slumped toward the filthy floor. Supporting the boy with one hand, he extracted the roll of notes from his pocket and slipped it into his own to the accompaniment of a vicious intake of breath from the gang. Then with a swift movement, Mark grabbed a big earthenware pitcher from the bar, slammed it straight at the cross-eyed man with the club and followed up the attack with a rush at the mob.

The pitcher caught Cross Eyes full in the face and as his arms jerked up, Mark snatched the heavy club and swung it right and left. A heavy missile hurtled past his head. He dived in the direction it came from; the club came down *thump . . . crack . . .* and a howl of agony rose as he ducked to defend himself against a knife thrust. Three men lay huddled on the grimy floor, two had retreated moaning and cursing horribly into the far corner. With his back against the bar, Mark drew a deep breath and eyed the ugly trio still defending the doorway. A sudden gleam in the eyes of one made him wheel instinctively and just in time to sidestep a blow from a mallet that would have felled a bull. Mark's club whirled horizontally, catching the grog-shop proprietor on the butt of the ear and he dropped without a sound.

Behind the bar, the rear doorway gaped open. Mark picked up the heavy mallet, swung it full at the larrikins, and without awaiting the result he pushed the limp body of Johnny over the bar and followed it himself, one foot landing heavily on the flat features of Mine Host. He turned in the doorway to jab the club savagely into the features of the pursuing gang leader; then, with Johnny's heels

dragging behind, he hauled his burden through a smoky, greasy kitchen into the open air.

A sharp crack like a pistol-shot sounded on the other side of the shack. Mark saw his horse rearing high with a small figure perched on its back swinging a long whip to some purpose. The thong snaked out again and the flat report was echoed by a howl of pain and the clatter of a knife to the ground.

Mark slung Johnny's limp body unceremoniously across the horse's wither and Larry steadied the burden with apprehension in his eyes; his uncle walked by the horse's side, attempting to stay the flow of blood from a nasty knife slash in his arm. A trickle of blood on the side of his head was already coagulating on the blond beard and the pestering flies buzzed round in a black cloud.

Mark walked erect with his head in the air and a grand elation pulsing through him. Maybe he *was* getting old, but the old bull was still good enough to beat up a mob of slinking dingoes. As for Johnny . . . a frown wrinkled his brow. This might be a lesson to him—but again it might not.

CHAPTER XXIV

MARK returned to the Murrumbidgee in a completely bewildered state of mind. Try as he might, he could not reconcile the feverish atmosphere of false prosperity and gambling in Sydney with the rigorous heart-breaking conditions in the bush. Prospective settlers were pouring into the port on every ship; they had money to invest, and all except the most cautious and conservative succumbed within a few hours of landing to the hectic fever of speculation. Properties changed hands daily at increasing prices. Men who had not been twenty-four hours in the country bought stations hundreds of miles away without waiting to inspect them or even to verify the existence of the properties.

They set out on the dry rough tracks with their goods and chattels piled on drays. Some took with them the barest necessities, others freighted the most incongruous articles into the wilds. Mark passed one optimist camped beside the track; his drays creaked beneath the weight of a huge piano and massive mahogany furniture. The probable state of his feelings when he got to his destination and saw the flimsy bark hut which constituted his homestead, was not difficult to imagine. He dragged a case on to the track, broke it open, and presented Marion with a large flask of eau-de-Cologne; then, producing a bottle of old brandy from the depths of the dray, he invited Mark to join him in invoking death and destruction on the bushrangers who had held him up the previous day and stolen the rest of his cellar and most of his provisions. It would

have been laughable had it not been so tragic.

Most of the original settlers along the river had long since gone. Some had sold out, but many had lost every penny they had invested through sheer ignorance and lack of experience. As Joe Hawdon, the big overlander, said to Mark one evening as they sat round the fire.

"The first man to take up a block of land breaks his heart, the second goes bankrupt, but the third makes his fortune."

At that time, however, the fortunes were being made by the speculators only. So long as they could keep up the counterfeit atmosphere of get-rich-quick that gripped the city they were safe. But it could not last much longer. The price of wool dropped and kept on dropping. The wool-producer—the merino sheep—declined in value accordingly. Then, too late, the banks shut down on their lavish lending policy and started to call in their loans.

And so came the crash that reverberated in every corner of the civilized world, and Australia embarked on the bitter years of the Hungry Forties.

The breaking of the long drought brought relief to the stock that had survived the long ordeal. But the bitterest pill was still to come for the men who had worked themselves to a standstill to save their flocks. Every other station was mortgaged far beyond its value. The bottom had fallen out of the wool market; forced sales of sheep that no one had money to buy sent stock prices cascading to ludicrous depths. Mark bought back for a pound, sheep that he had sold at five pounds a head, till he was afraid to load his country with another hoof. And still the market dropped.

Then commenced the saddest sight of all. The

tide of land-seekers that had pushed out past him, hastening eagerly down the river to reach their El Dorado and make their fortunes overnight, began to turn, and the dispossessed squatters started to straggle back to the city, discomfited, dispirited, and broken.

Mark deliberately kept away from Sydney. But even at home there was an air of impending calamity emanating from the tragic stream ebbing back under their loads of shattered hopes. Every day brought further disquieting rumours. Then came a whisper that a bank had closed its doors, and Mark could wait no longer.

He had seen Sydney in many phases, but never had he imagined scenes approaching those that he found this time. The streets were thronged with men—mostly bearded bushmen and squatters wandering aimlessly up and down; and closed shops with their dead boarded fronts added to the depression. Most of the men carried their tragedies in their eyes. But there was a sprinkling of fatalists among them: the milk had been spilt, and crying would do more harm than good. So why not be cheerful about it. Nevertheless, Mark found some of the macabre cheerfulness far more trying than the passionate grief of those who could see nothing but ruin and disaster and the futility of living on.

On the way to Sydney he found Jack in Parramatta and could hardly credit the changed appearance of his younger brother. The black hair and beard were plentifully streaked with grey and the once cheerful, laughing eyes were sunken and dull. There was a strange quietness about Jack. He greeted Mark with a casual nod, then looked away again. Mark gripped him by the shoulder.

"What's wrong, Jack?"

The other shifted his apathetic gaze to Mark's horse, then he slowly dragged a handful of crumpled bank notes from a pocket and held them out, some falling to the ground unheeded.

"I've got plenty of them things," he said in a flat voice. "You told me to put my money in the bank. Now the bank says it has given my money to somebody else—all it's got left is bills—paper. That's all I've got left for all my hundreds of fine bullocks. . . . Paper!"

"What was your bank? Have they all stopped?" Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"I put my money in the Bank of Australia—the bank that belonged to your Pure Merinos!"

Mark shook him gently by the shoulder.

"Come on, man! We got on all right without money in the old days. We can do it again. Where's Birrong . . . and young John and the rest of them?"

"Birrong . . . she's back home. She's too fat to ride a horse now. She just sits beside the fire all day . . . smokin' her pipe."

Mark frowned. There was something wrong here that he could not understand. Then at a firm grip on his arm, he turned to see Larry beside him—grown into a tall, level-eyed youth of eighteen. Obeying the boy's signal he drew aside with him.

"What's wrong with your father?" he demanded sharply. "Is it the bank?"

Larry shook his head. "It's John: he's dead," he said simply. "He used to get on the rum every time he came to Sydney—just like that time you saw him. Last week he got mixed up in a fight—some row about a woman—and John got killed.

They don't know at home yet. . . . And I can't get the Ole Man to go back."

Mark saw it all now. Young John, of all the family, had always been his father's favourite. He was the counterpart of his parent at the same age—wild, reckless, and a born horseman—the father had lived again in the son. When you asked him about his family he invariably recounted some recent escapade of young John's. Little wonder he was taking it so badly.

Mark rode on to Sydney heavy at heart, trying to fathom the origin of the wild streak that had brought the lad to his untimely end. Jack might have behaved like that himself, but for the restraining influence of the gipsy. Ann would certainly have corrected her son's lax surveillance of his family had she been alive. But Jack liked them wild and seldom interfered; while no one could be more easy-going than Birrong.

Mark's brows knotted in perplexity as the memory of Birrong's ancestry crept into his thoughts: her father black, her mother a convict. He had seen so many apparently pure-bred merino ewes producing lambs that threw back to the old hairy piebald sheep that the question of heredity was ever uppermost in his mind. Yet young Larry was different; he had just as much spirit as any of the family, but he had more balance than the lot of them, and Mark liked him best of all his nephews. The girls still remained his first favourites: Ann and her husband were away up north with the early settlers pioneering the Darling Downs; Kareela must be twenty-three—it was surprising that she was still single.

Mark came out of his dark reverie as the first

outlying houses showed up, and for the first time he became conscious of a man riding parallel with him. One glance satisfied him that here was another unfortunate, and the travel-stained Arab he rode gave a hint of the affluence from which he had fallen. The stranger met Mark's eyes as they lifted from an inspection of the horse and he nodded quietly.

"He and his mate cost me sixty guineas apiece last year. A month ago, I had to sell the other horse for eighteen shillings!"

Mark could find nothing to say in reply. The story was all too common.

The stranger went on in a flat, tired voice: "I paid sixty shillings a head for my sheep and worked night and day to keep them alive in the drought. They have just been sold—for a shilling each!"

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? A year ago, I had ten thousand pounds. I have lost my property, my sheep, everything—except Ben here. I cannot go back to England. . . . I have not the money to pay my fare. So . . . I have come back to Sydney."

They separated with a silent nod. Mark drew aside to meet his agent and the stranger rode on to join the swelling ranks of broken squatterdom that thronged the streets of Sydney. Jones wore a hunted, furtive look.

"It isn't safe to be an agent, Mr Sim, with all those fellows coming back to sit on your doorstep. Your bank is still safe; the Sydney Bank and the Bank of Australia have closed; although people are so frightened they won't look at a bank note. You don't want to buy a cheap property—or some sheep, do you?"

Mark shook his head decidedly. "I've got more than I want—there's twenty thousand sheep on the place now."

"Now's the time to buy!" Jones persisted. "Look at Wentworth—he's buying up stations that have gone bankrupt . . . getting them for next to nothing."

"He's the man they used to call the friend of the people!"

"Names don't hurt! When wool prices are back he'll be the richest man in the country—him and Ben Boyd."

"The man that started that bank?"

"The same! He arrived in his fine yacht, the other day, and he's buying up stations right and left. *He* knows a thing or two, that gentleman!"

Mark nodded grimly.

"Yes . . . I heard some things about him. Lives on champagne and the best that money can buy—and cut his shepherds' wages to three shillin's and tenpence a week, with only meat and flour for rations. He couldn't afford to give them sugar and tea—post-and-rail tea at that!"

Jones shrugged his shoulders.

"I know it's hard. But . . . well, that's how men make fortunes."

"Well, I'm paying my men what I think they're worth for as long as I can afford it. Did you see that poor devil on the grey horse that rode in with me?"

The agent held up a protesting hand.

"I know him. I could have sold him a good property at a fair price, but he listened to that oily-tongued Maloney and got left with a place that wouldn't carry a sheep to six acres in a good year

and sheep that were rotten with scab. Better men than him are coming back here every day. I could tell you of a New England station with 4680 sheep and 207 head of cattle that was bought yesterday for £505. Threlkeld sold nine thousand sheep at a penny each, and the owner of Sandy Creek station couldn't even get an offer for his property. What do you think he sold it for last night? . . . A pound of tobacco and two gallons of rum!"

Mark rode on to the Bank of New South Wales and left Jones moodily calculating the commission that the sale of Sandy Creek would have yielded. The harassed bank manager received Mark with some trepidation until he discovered that his client had no intention of withdrawing his capital, then he looked as though he could have embraced him.

"Have faith in us, Mr Sim, and we will weather the storm. We are not so deeply committed as the other banks and we will give you every possible assistance."

"I only want enough to pay and feed my men and you can be responsible for my rent and licence fees. I've got to shear my sheep, and if it doesn't pay to sell the wool, I'll stack it till things get better." He paused in the doorway for a final word. "Maybe you won't see me before then. I'll keep away from Sydney for a while."

Mark had a meal at a small eating-house. He hated the hotels and the supercilious stares that he got from the diners. His table manners were still rather primitive in spite of Marion's tuition; there had been no such things as forks in his young days in the Valley. Even in the dingy, odorous eating-house there was no escape from the prevailing topic. A burly squatter sitting next to Mark cursed the

banks, the storekeepers, and every one in the colony but himself, throughout the meal. "Look at me!" he complained. "I have ten thousand sheep and a fine property on the Macquarie, and these tight-wads won't give me credit for a chest of tea. What am I going to do?"

Mark wiped his bearded mouth with the back of his hand as he rose to leave.

"Looks like you'll have to drink water like the rest of us!" he said as he passed out.

On a vacant allotment near by, a dozen ex-squatters were gathered round a fire. A few years ago, most of them would have complained about the best that Sydney's hotels had to offer. To-day they were sharing a vacant lot with a handful of dirty aborigines; unrolling their blankets on the ground and cooking a meal on an open fire in better health and with fewer grumbles than at any previous period of their lives. One of their number, a short, stoutish man with a walrus moustache and twinkling eyes, got to his feet at the insistent demands of his friends.

"Come on, Billy, let's have it!"

Mark joined the audience that drifted democratically in to share anything that might be going free. The little man cleared his throat and struck a pose:

When I was at home I was down on my luck
And I earnt a poor living by drawing a truck.
But old aunt died and left me a thousand; "Oho,
I'll start on my travels," said Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

So off to Australia came Billy Barlow.

When to Sydney I got, there a merchant I met
Who said he would teach me a fortune to get;
He'd cattle and sheep past the colony's bounds
Which he sold with the station for my thousand pounds.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

He gammoned the cash out of Billy Barlow.

When the bargain was struck and the money was paid,
He said, "My dear fellow, your fortune is made,
I can furnish supplies for the station, you know,
And your bill is sufficient, good Mr Barlow."

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

A gentleman settler was Billy Barlow.

At last I set out, and I then did repair
For my station once more, and at length I got there.
But a few days before, the blacks, you must know,
Had speared all the cattle of Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

"It's a beautiful country," said Billy Barlow.

And for nine months before, no rain there had been,
So the devil a blade of grass could be seen,
And one-third of my wethers the scab they had got,
While the other two-thirds had just died of the rot.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

"I shall soon be a settler," said Billy Barlow.

And the matter to mend, now my bill was near due,
So I wrote to my friend and just asked to renew.
He replied he was sorry he couldn't because
The bill had passed into Tom Burdekin's claws.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

"But perhaps he'll renew it," said Billy Barlow.

I applied; to renew he was quite content
If secured and allowed just three hundred per cent.;
But as I couldn't do, Barr, Rodgers and Co.
Soon sent up a summons for Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

They soon settled the business of Billy Barlow.

For a month or six weeks I stewed over my loss
And a tall man rode up one day on a black horse.
He asked, "Don't you know me?" I answered him "No."
"Why," said he, "My name's Kinsmill; how are you,
Barlow?"

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

He'd got a *fi fa* for poor Billy Barlow.

What I'd left of my sheep and my traps he did seize
And he said, "They won't pay all the costs and my fees."
Then he sold off the lot and I'm sure 'twas a sin,
At sixpence a head and the station giv'n in.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

"I'll go back to England," said Billy Barlow.

My sheep being sold and my money all gone
I wandered about then quite sad and forlorn;
How I managed to live, it would shock you to know,
And as thin as a lath grew poor Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

Quite down on his luck was poor Billy Barlow.

In a few weeks more, the sheriff, you see,
Sent the tall man on horseback once more unto me;
Having got all he could by the writ of *fi fa*
By way of a change, he'd brought up a *ca sa*.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

He seized on the body of Billy Barlow.

He took me to Sydney and there they did lock
Poor unfortunate Billy fast "under the clock."
And to get myself out I was forced, you must know,
The schedule to file of poor Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, lackaday, oh.

In the list of insolvents was Billy Barlow.

Mark moved on with the little man's lines running in his head and a picture of his comic deprecatory gestures before him.

Two things remained to be done before he could head west again. He rapped timidly at the heavy door of the Young Ladies' College where Janet was receiving her final polish. It was an ordeal that he invariably put off until the last minute. He hated the atmosphere of the place from the supercilious stares of the two old maids who conducted the school, to the dim sitting-room crammed with massive black furniture, hard high-backed chairs, mirrors, china ornaments and bric-a-brac, where he fidgeted in supreme discomfort until Janet was

ushered in. However, it had been decreed that the children were to receive a first-class education and he put up with it for their sake.

Janet was coming home for good at the end of the year. She was sixteen, and her early gawkinsness had been replaced by a prim sanctimoniousness that irritated her father. Last time she came home, Mark felt her disapproval of him at every turn. He had always picked up a mutton-chop in his fingers to eat it; it was the natural, sensible way, and Miss Janet might fiddle round with her knife and fork for as long as she pleased without ever cleaning up the bones like he could. Janet objected to sleeping between blankets; she must have sheets. And each time he visited her at school he seemed to feel her eyes inspecting his feet and then his clothes before she came forward to greet him. He put up with it for Marion's sake, but at the same time he felt that they were paying too great a price for the alleged benefits of education.

Young Mark was at school at Parramatta; at fourteen he was a quiet, industrious boy, short of stature, fair-haired and stolid—in brief, there was little between him and the boy who tramped the roads with old Brady, and chaffered with Parson Marsden forty years before. His father was quietly proud of him.

All the long ride back to the Murrumbidgee, Mark's thoughts oscillated between the future of the Sim family and the problems that obsessed the pastoral industry. He had persuaded Jack to go north again and hoped he would stay at home until times improved. Jack had lost every penny he possessed when his bank crashed, but he still had his cattle and his property was unencumbered.

Mark had arranged for Larry to come back to him on the Murrumbidgee. He liked the boy and he wanted someone to help him look after his widely scattered flocks. It was too big a job, now, for himself alone. Wilson was too old to venture far from the homestead, and Mark junior was still too young for the responsibility. He would rather have one of his own name and blood to help him through the troublous times that loomed ahead.

There was grass and water in plenty all the way back to the river; sheep were fat and nature wore her most bounteous smile. Yet every man he met was ill at ease and anxious for the latest news from Sydney. Men were starving in the midst of plenty. They had meat in abundance, but neither the money nor yet the credit to provide themselves with flour, tea and sugar. Ruin stared the pastoral industry in the face. And, as the main and only primary industry in Australia, it was dragging with it in its fall every occupation and business that had risen with it. The dog was dying and its fleas must share its fate.

Marion received the news of their financial plight with quiet resignation. It interfered with her private ambitions for the children. Still, they were better off than most people. They had a home, they had plenty to eat, and they did not owe a penny.

For all that, the plight of the homeless families that wended their hopeless way back up the river, hung like a gloomy, depressing pall over the entire country-side. The position intensified with each succeeding month; never a sign of hope or of surcease appeared to brighten the bleak horizon.

Then one warm evening as they sat on the long veranda after the evening meal, the sound of rapid

hoof-beats reached them from the northern road. Marion left Larry to his good-natured teasing of Janet, no longer the school-girl, and joined her husband. The horseman reined up at the door and Mark rose to welcome his neighbour.

"Good night, Mr O'Brien. You're travelling late."

Henry O'Brien laughed cheerfully.

"Can you put me up for the night, Mrs Sim? I want to have a long talk with your good man."

"We're glad to have you at any time, Mr O'Brien. With all those poor men making back to Sydney, I'm more than glad to hear a cheerful laugh like your own. Have you good news?"

"Well, I hope so. We'll see what Mark thinks of it!"

Marion hurried indoors to prepare the spare room and the two men settled themselves on the bench near the front door. O'Brien did most of the talking. He was cultured and intelligent, and no man on the river was held in greater esteem. The scheme he unfolded to Mark that night seemed feasible; if it succeeded, it would lift the sheep industry out of the slough of despond where it lay wallowing and give some measure of hope to the men and women who still clung to their land.

"Look at it this way," O'Brien said. "To-day there are I don't know how many millions of sheep in Australia and the value of a sheep is not more than one shilling—even though it may carry one-and-sixpenceworth of wool. Even so, people are not interested, for we cannot make a living with sheep at one-and-six. But here is a point that we have all missed so far. *A sheep can produce other things besides wool.* One of these is tallow. Now, tallow is worth twenty-five pounds a ton and it's a poor

sheep that will not give five shillingworth of tallow. . . ."

Mark interrupted, his eyes kindling with enthusiasm.

"But how do you get the tallow?"

"*Boil them down!* I have been doing it for the past month. I have killed and skinned my oldest sheep and boiled down the carcasses for their tallow. Think of it, man! At a shilling a head, your sheep will not pay droving fees, but at five shillings a head for tallow, plus one and sixpence for wool . . . what do you think?"

Mark stood up and looked earnestly at his neighbour.

"I'm going to buy some boilers to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XXV

FROM Henry O'Brien's experiment on his station at Yass, boiling-down establishments spread to wherever there were sheep in Australia and their odorous operations polluted the clean dry air of the continent. In that first year, nearly a quarter of a million sheep were treated. The following year, three-quarters of a million went to the vats, and in 1850 two and a half million sheep and a quarter of a million head of cattle went to the boiling-down works and were turned into candles.

Money began to trickle back into circulation slowly but steadily, and the pastoral industry got on its feet again after the wild debauch of speculation that had pushed it into the gutter of the Hungry Forties.

Mark sat on his front veranda where he could look away up the winding creek with the tall, needle-leaved casuarinas leaning over it. At sixty-two, he was less active in body; he was heavier, stouter, and the great blond beard that flowed over his chest was bleaching with the years. He left most of the supervision of the shepherds and the outlying flocks to young Mark nowadays, and was able to concentrate more fully on the management of his huge estate. Young Mark was twenty-two and James, the younger son, was nineteen. Their hands carried out the ideas originating in the father's active brain, and as he sat there in his cool shady seat, Mark was supremely content with the situation.

Away on his right, stretched the long post-and-

rail fence of the horse-paddock; it ran from the creek to the high railed stockyard, then away up the rising slope that had been thinned-of its timber to let the grass grow. From a corner of one eye he could see a score of horses released from the yard, making their way back through the trees—bays and browns and chestnuts, and the four grey harness horses that he drove to Gundagai or Goulburn or Sydney whenever business took him abroad.

Beyond the horse-paddock, higher up the creek, lay the ram-paddock, and across the creek was the big stud-sheep paddock. These were his particular domain; he only rode out on a tour of the flocks once or twice a year and at shearing-time. At the back of his mind lay a plan for the extension of those fences—mile upon mile over hill and plain and creek—to encircle his far-flung boundaries and then to subdivide it all into paddocks where the sheep could range in freedom as in the old Valley days.

He was passing on his great fund of experience to the boys; they would start where he left off, and he knew the future would be safe in their hands. There had been a little difficulty about James; Marion had other ambitions for her younger son beyond becoming a squatter. She wanted him to stay on at school—to become a lawyer or a doctor; she even contemplated sending him to London to complete his studies. But Mark had shown unusual obstinacy against the proposal.

It was of no avail to remind him that several of Captain John Macarthur's sons had taken up professions. Macarthur had made his name as a sheep-breeder; his sons had sold the original flock and it had gone from the Cowpastures to Victoria—as they called the Port Phillip district nowadays. They

had not carried on the tradition. If the world remembered them it would not be for their own accomplishments, but because they were the sons of John Macarthur.

Mark had made his name, too. People laughed covertly at his uncouthness, made jokes about his hatred of wearing boots; but every sheepman in the length and breadth of Australia had heard of Mark Sim. He had kept his flocks intact when most of the breeders had ruined theirs by crossing them with the big coarse-woolled English Leicester sheep. He had maintained quality in the hectic buying scramble of the boom years when anything on four legs that grew a semblance of wool could be sold as a sheep. He had not taken advantage of the misfortunes of others to make money like Wentworth and Ben Boyd and many others, and the integrity of his name stood high. His reputation as a sheepman ranked with the highest—with Riley, Cox, Lee, Bettington, Walker, and those others who had made pastoral history.

The sound of voices in the room behind broke the train of his comforting thoughts, and Marion—buxom as her mother had been when she first came to the country—put her head round the door.

"Mark's wanting to take Janet with him to muster some sheep. Do you think she should go with these bushrangers about?"

Her husband's ponderous beard nodded.

"Do her good to get out—so long as she doesn't put that new-fangled side-saddle on one of my horses."

Presently young Mark rode round the house, sturdy and thickset, with a fringe of fair downy beard on his chin and a big cabbage-tree hat on his

head. He raised his stockwhip in greeting and passed on with a dog at his heels to join his sister at the creek below.

The sight of Janet with her head enveloped in a big poke bonnet raised another train of thought in the man sitting motionless on the veranda. The girl had lost many of the fastidious notions and snobbish ideas she had brought back from school, but she had never fitted into her old niche in the family circle. Life in the country had been too dull and monotonous for her, and although she had settled down cheerfully enough after a time, that too had ended suddenly when Mark sent young Larry back home again. The creases deepened on the big man's brow. He liked Larry, and during the three years that the boy had spent with them the liking had increased. But when it came to marrying his daughter, that was a different matter. So Larry rode away and Janet had turned quiet and remained aloof from all of them—even from her mother.

Young Mark looked back at his sister riding slightly in the rear.

"Why did you make all that fuss about coming?"

"Because I didn't want to! I hate your smelly sheep. You could have got Bulla to help you."

Mark shook his head and a mischievous smile played round his lips.

"Not to-day. I have a special job for you."

Janet's blue eyes were fixed on her horse's ears and her bearing made it very plain that she was not interested in the project.

"Have you heard from Larry lately?"

The girl's lips set in a firm line.

"You know I haven't!" she retorted.

• They rode in silence for a time along the winding track that followed the general course of the river and meandered pleasantly out and in among the great white-barked gums. A few fleecy clouds floated high in the blue above and the air was cheerful with the comings and goings of the myriad birds that haunted the river and its century-old trees.

"What *was* the Old Man's objection to Larry? He left in too much of a hurry to tell me and no one else would say a word."

The girl's features were hidden in her bonnet. At length she faced her brother, her eyes hot and defiant, and pink spots showing against the pallor of each cheekbone.

"Well, if you must know, Father wouldn't let Larry marry me because . . . of his mother!"

Mark whistled.

"Was *that* it! But you can't blame Larry because his grandfather was black. Larry's as white as I am. I like him!"

"You know what Father's like! All he can think about is breeding sheep. I suppose he wants to pick a husband for me as if he were buying a ram to suit his ewes. He had better not! I'll run away first!"

Her brother regarded her flushed cheeks and the blue eyes with the tears starting in them, and grinned cheerfully.

"Looks to me as though you're still fond of the fellow." He shifted his gaze ahead and looked steadily out along the brim of his hat. His keen ears had caught a faint distant sound and little by little he sensed, rather than saw, something moving

away down among the river-gums. He leaned forward in the saddle and called to his sister:

"Come on, Janet, we'd better canter along or we'll never get there."

As the big mob of cattle took shape ahead, she urged her horse alongside him.

"Whose cattle are these, Mark?"

He eased the pace back to a walk.

"Some overlander's mob. Wait for me at that clump of ironbarks over there. I'll just go across and find out who it is."

Janet dismounted in the cool shade of the straight, rough-barked trees and idly watched the tide of cattle flowing up the track with the dust hovering above them. A horseman detached himself from the rear of the mob and cantered briskly in her direction. She stared hard. It wasn't Mark's chestnut . . . the man was riding a brown horse . . . sitting easily in the saddle like . . . like only one other man she knew. He vaulted to her feet before his horse had checked its speed and wrapped her in his arms, stifling her astonished, breathless—

"Larry!"

At length she released herself sufficiently to look up at him with shining eyes. His hat and shoulders were powdered with dust and so were the clean-cut bronzed features with the unmistakable thin gipsy nose.

"Larry, how did Mark know . . . ?"

He grinned shamelessly down at her.

"I sent a boy ahead yesterday to tell him."

Janet thrilled gratefully at this new aspect of her brother, but had no time to think more about it. Larry was talking rapidly.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked. "They

have discovered gold at Bathurst—the Ophir! I just got the news yesterday. Everybody's going mad about it. *Gold!* Think of it, Janet! The ground's full of it. We'll be rich!"

"But, Larry . . ."

"Listen, Janet, promise you'll wait for me!"

"You know I will, Larry—but don't let it be for long. I'll run away with you now if you'll take me!"

"But your father . . . ?"

She stamped her foot and her blue eyes flashed.

"What do I care about his fine ideas! What were *his* father and mother, anyway? You're as good as they were, and I'll go with you whenever you're ready!"

The hug she got left her breathless. Larry glanced at the distant cattle, then turned for a final embrace before slipping into the saddle.

Janet stood on the fringe of the ironbarks waving till the dust-cloud swallowed his slim, straight figure, then went on watching till the cracking of whips grew fainter and died in the distance.

The muffled noise of the passing mob floated up to the veranda where Mark Sim sat, and fitted in as an undertone to his thoughts. The tidings of the gold-rush had reached him a day ago, but he had kept the news to himself. He could foresee the social upheaval that must follow when, by the lucky stroke of a pick, Jack could become as good as his master. He pondered on what was going to happen to the flocks and herds when men deserted them to follow the irresistible lure of gold, and his thoughts were uneasy.

He sensed that a new era was dawning on the fortunes of the Sim family and on Australia. The

tempo of life was quickening to the tramp of the hurrying feet pressing on up the river to be in on the latest rush. He could hear the growing murmur, like the restless, quickening pulse of drums swelling in on the final lingering chords of a movement to presage a new theme. It would penetrate to the farthest-out settler in the land, to every corner of the earth with its vibrant, inciting message. Ophir . . . the Turon! . . . *Ballarat!* . . . *Bendigo!* . . . **GOLD!!**

The first stormy movement was merging—not dying—into a stirring new theme . . . the second movement of the pastoral symphony.





Staff Bulletins
66 Macarthur Street,
Parramatta



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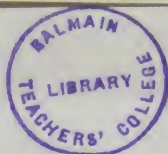
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